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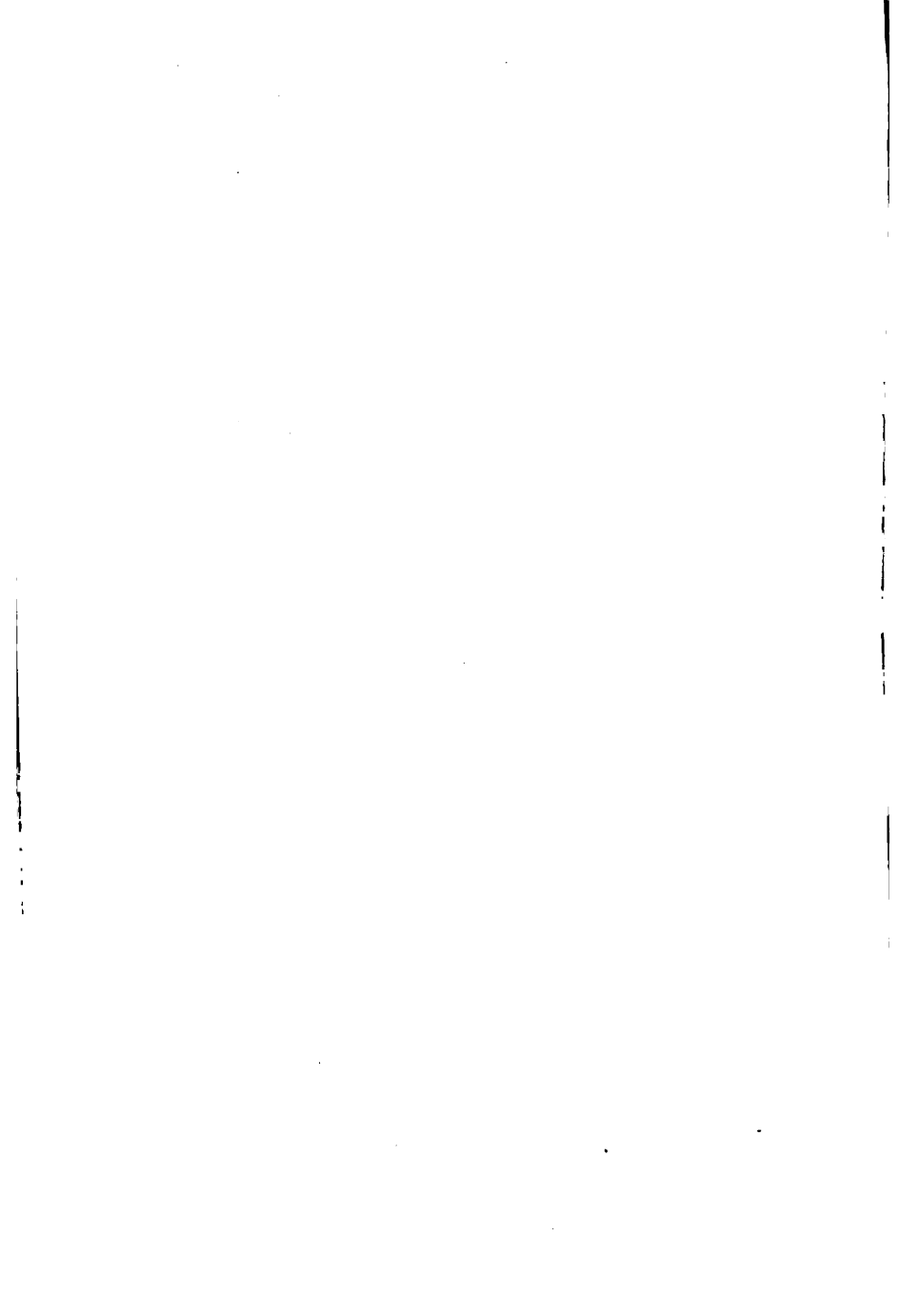
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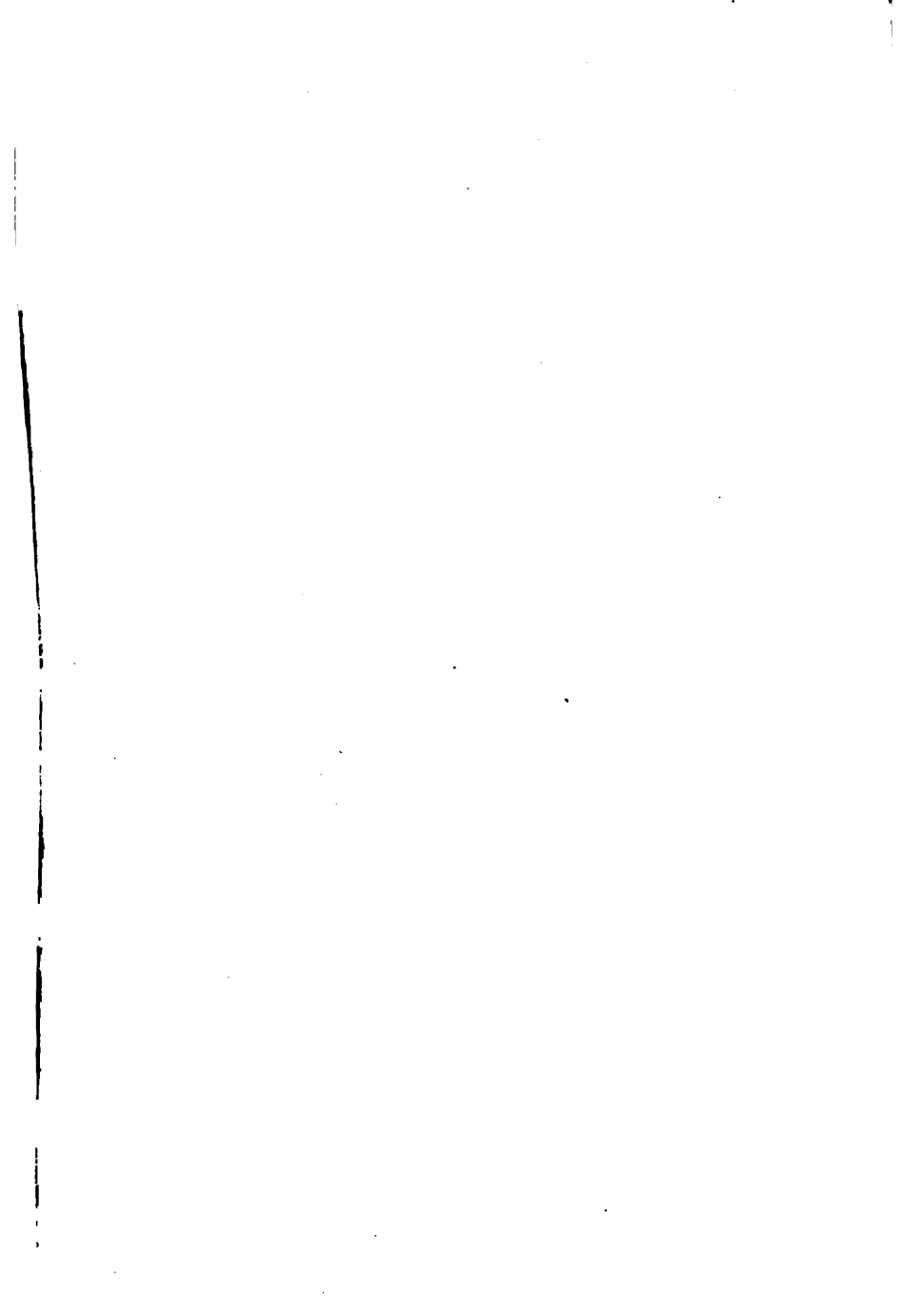
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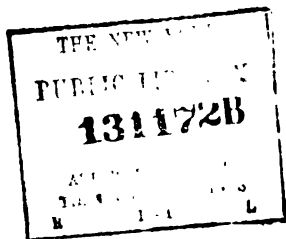
Julia Houston Railey



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To
MY FATHER AND MOTHER

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Show Down

SHOW DOWN

CHAPTER I

NANCY SURVEYS THE UNIVERSE

"THERE," said Nancy—untruthfully, by the way—"dies Mr. Jim Protheroe, politician, school-director, and scoundrel!"

She was tearing a letter signed by that gentleman into tiny bits, which fluttered idly down into her lap, thence to the stone steps beneath her, against the cheek of a girl who sat below. The letter had been enclosed in a cheap, smudged envelope post-marked "June 10, 1911," and addressed, with sprawling brevity, to "Miss N. Carroll, care of ——" one of the great Eastern colleges for women.

Her companion glanced up with a start.

"A turn-down? After all these weeks?"

"Flat! Flat as a pricked bubble."

Nancy raised a small hand to her lips and blew the last paper scrap off into space, then looked down with a whimsical, wry smile into the concerned, almost motherly countenance which was the property of Miss Peggy Lawton.

"You behold, my dear," she stated, "a young woman of brilliant mentality, sans job—sans cash—sans everything, except an A.B. of very dubious commercial value to the gr-reat wor-ld," scoffingly, "into which we young souls go, to-morrow." Echoes of a Baccalaureate sermon were in her head.

"The man's a fool," muttered Peggy, with indignation. "A measly, little old third-rate school job like that! *You!* But I'm glad of it, Nancy"—seriously. "Sounds mean, but I am. Never *did* want you to bury yourself in those back-woods. Now, maybe you'll——"

"I'm not glad," Nancy rejoined soberly. "I wanted it." She sighed. "It's so deadly dull to work just for money. So awfully—universal, you know. That job promised a fight." An unregenerate gleam flickered into her eyes. "A real, honest-to-goodness fight, Peg! This Protheroe man's a small-scale octopus. He's got that poor, fool district, and pretty nearly the whole county, squeezed up—like that—" She tightened her little outspread hand. "The poverty, the ignorance out there in those 'poor white' pine flats is appalling. And he trades on it—grafts on it—gets rich on it! While the town of Carrollton goes blissfully ahead with its eyes shut, making money on cotton, and lets it all slide. But I *know* I could have—Shucks!"

She scowled disgustedly.

Peggy said nothing. Her eyes were on the gray pile of a building across a grassy space from her—

a Gothic, four-towered library, ivy-hung, like the one upon whose ancient steps they sat, deserted, in the summer twilight, during the college dinner hour. Its great, emblazoned western windows were sheets of gold in the dying sunlight full upon them, and slim, darting swallows circled its serrated towers. A tremor passed, now and then, through the vines clothing it, as the faint evening breeze sighed in the air. To the east, the campus stretched away to a sky colored like old, delicately tinted porcelain; a sweeping elm on a near-by hill's edge silhouetted its intricate black profile against that far-off loveliness of saffron and rose.

But Nancy was not looking at it. She was still scowling. In a moment, however, she chuckled, remarking: "After all, though, it's a good joke on me. Do you remember how I lay awake at night trying to decide to give up the thing I was wild to do—social work in town with the Charities Aid—and *take* this little one-horse rural job, purely for the good of the community? Oh! I had the noblest motives. Persuaded myself that I owed it to Carrollton to go back and do this missionary work for them. And I felt *so* virtuous, and *such* a martyr to duty, Peg! You can't imagine!" She spoke tragi-comically.

Peggy smiled a little.

"There was Cousin Lætitia too, and her loneliness, to clinch it. So I cast the die. Then, once I'd decided, I got all enthusiastic over it, and I've been reading up on education like mad and getting

fearfully intelligent on the subject. And you know how much social work I've been doing in the city right along? It was all for this, even before I wrote and requested the job. I was so sure of it, you see, with that vacancy Protheroe says he's 'filled.' I was planning to just tear up the earth in general, introduce everything introduceable, have surveys, get the government farm agents on the job, and—oh, everything!"

She waved her hand airily.

"Believe me, I was going to give that county a demonstration of education as she should be and ain't! Poor Protheroe," with another chuckle. "He must have gotten psychic wind of my alarming revolutionary schemes, and been scared, and thought, 'This will *never* do!'"

Peggy looked worried.

"But, Nance dear," she commented anxiously, "this leaves you with exactly nothing in sight, since you lost out on the high-school proposition."

"The high-school was afraid of me, too, I guess," Nancy mused. "At least they sounded so. I seem to be a fearsome personage, Peg," and she flashed an impudent little grin at the latter.

Peggy persisted, seriously. "But what *will* you do now, Honey? Stay here and get a job?"

Nancy shook her head. "Go South, young woman, go South! My face is set toward home"—dramatically—"and I—shall—go!"

"Then what?" Peggy would not smile.

"Darned if I know!" Nancy shrugged. "The

meeting is open for suggestions, my dear! The Chair will entertain a motion as to Miss Carroll's future career. There are two stipulations: first, it must be remunerative; second, worthy of her extraordinary abilities!"

Judging from her tone, she had no great opinion of those same abilities. The college, however, had, for four years, rendered her a species of idolatry as its cleverest amateur actress, and promoter-in-chief of popular movements. It approved of many of its students—it adored Nancy. But it had never regarded her with any especial seriousness.

In spite of her intensely earnest espousal of causes—from Suffrage, her prime passion at that period, up, or down; in spite of her admitted efficiency in scholarship and action she was considered, by all but the very few, more or less as a court jester—a sort of beloved, free-lance Pierrette for the entire group, which delighted in the flame and sun of her acting, in her piquant, pointed wit, her decided, original opinions. People quoted, continually, her audacious limericks and bits of satire, aimed at Faculty members or college traditions which she considered dull and therefore fair game for fun making. Nancy laughed at everything—sooner or later—including herself, and so the college laughed with her. If she ever wept, no one knew it, not even Peg Lawton, who understood her best.

Many people loved Nancy. She could have had dozens of confidantes had she been willing. But

for all her ingenuous frankness about everything she thought, conventional, or horrifyingly the reverse, in the opinion of the Madame Grundys of her acquaintance, she was exceedingly reticent about what she felt, and about her intimate, personal concerns.

Her particular friends, at the end of four years, knew only that she must be poor, because she lived in one of the rooms of the most inexpensive classification and dressed very simply, yet with a certain smartness, not of the season's mode so much as just—Nancy. They knew that her parents were dead and that she had been reared by her Cousin Lætitia Carroll, a dainty little old spinster who wore lace caps. The two lived in the old Carroll home in the small Southern town of Carrollton, named after a remote ancestor.

"God rest his soul!" Nancy used to say, vindictively. "I hope he turns in his grave every time a street-car bumps over the railway tracks he let 'em lay right through the town."

They had all seen Carrollton in a series of vivid, caustic word pictures, for Nancy was not, at that stage, in love with her native city. Further than that no one had gone. There was still a wall.

A rather unhappy Peggy sat on one side of that wall now, longing, pitifully, to break through to the complete solitude on the other side of it—and dumb. All she finally managed to say was, "Let's think of things you could do down there, Honey.

Aren't there *any* social agencies at all for which you might work?"

"Nothing, absolutely nothing. No Juvenile Court or Charities, no institutions—nothing. Plenty of room for all of 'em, however. Almost twenty thousand people there—three times that many in the county. Rich cotton county, too; back woods only take up a third."

"Your old suffrage organizing, then?"

Nancy shook her head. "No money to pay salaries."

They canvassed possibilities for a few moments, but got nowhere.

Suddenly Nancy broke in gaily, with one of her flashing changes of mood: "Oh, well! I'm always talking about my love of adventure. I'll have a chance to show myself how sincere I am."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't *you* think it's rather adventurous to land in your home town jobless, penniless, a good many hundred dollars in debt, with your choice of stenography or dressmaking, say, as a profession, and no intention of doing either? I do. I'm beginning to like the idea enormously. Really, I am!" She sat up straighter and thumped her knee in growing enthusiasm.

"It doesn't appeal to me," said Peggy, with soberness.

"Old skeleton at the feast!" Nancy laughed at her.

"What does Doctor Bob have to say about all this?" Peggy inquired, after a pause.

"He was disappointed about the high-school fiasco, but he'll be pleased as anything the rural job's blown up—been warning me against it for a solid month. Bob says not to worry, he'll have some things lined up for me to consider when I get home."

"I *like* Bob Singleton, Nancy!" declared Peggy, positively. "You've known him all your life, haven't you?"

"Yes, ever since the age of mud pies. We—" she stopped suspiciously. Peggy was glancing with indifference at the landscape. Nancy reached out, put one hand under her chin and gazed searchingly into her innocent eyes. "Pegeen, me love," she smiled, "I can read ye like a book. Now, I like you and Bob better than any two people in the world—and in precisely the same way—but I'd every bit as soon marry you as marry Bob, or anyone else. You ought to know my ideas on that subject by now."

"And is Bob—equally platonic?" queried Peggy casually.

"Why, certainly!" Nancy was emphatic to the point of irritation. "He wouldn't marry me if I wanted him to." Then she smiled, in reminiscence. "He grew up with the idea that he was going to, strangely enough, and used to be most devoted when he was a senior in high-school and I was a freshman. But when he went off to Johns Hopkins and got so keen about his profession he very sensibly changed his mind, and we've been

wonderful pals ever since. It's the best way," sagely.

Peggy made no reply. She was thinking that the man who would not marry Nancy Carroll if he could, would be blind, deaf, dumb, and feeble-minded. She stole a sidelong look.

Nancy was a slim little thing—but slim like a steel blade, tempered and taut with spirit. Peggy's impulse was always to put both arms around her; only, somehow, she didn't, often. Nancy stood so coolly, laughingly, implacably alone. She had a face tremulous with sun and shadow. There were race and a fragile sensitiveness in the delicate fluid curves and lifts and contours of it. One drew a sudden breath at the contrast between her heavy, soft cloud of black hair and the tea-rose white, faintly flushed skin, with its pale blue tracery at the temples. The rise of her lashes might show eyes blue in a mood of laughter or shadowed to musing violet; thoughtful gray in one light, startling, wide black in another.

Nancy's traitorous face thought and felt for her, as open to one's delight as the March sky, with its gusts and flying clouds, its brief darkenings and radiant shine. Yet there was a pride of poise about the little head, and she had a focused look of alert intelligence, a certain humorous and decided set of her well-cut mouth, too, that belied the hint of emotional instability. A face somewhat at war with itself, yielding only to rein in. Irish, or Latin—perhaps French—ancestry? It was hard to tell.

Peggy looked away at last, thinking other things. But, being wise beyond her years, she said nothing, and they fell into a long silence.

The rose of the sky was in ashes, now. No sound, no movement, except that of the circling swallows, stirred the stillness.

"It is so beautiful," Nancy said at last, in a half whisper, with a quiver in her voice, "that it hurts—here." She put one hand to her throat.

"Yes," replied Peggy.

A group of picnickers came into view in the distance. They filed over a hilltop and out of sight, singing. The words of the old song, and the half jovial, half mournful strain of it, came clearly on the breeze:

"Where, oh, where, are the reverend Seniors?
Out, out in the wide, wide world!"

"When I am back in that hot, dusty, little town," said Nancy, slowly, "I shall feel as if I had been there all the time and had imagined all this. What a strange, dream-like quality living has, Peg. You pass through a certain period, and everything in it is very solid and definite, all around you, and the people are stupid or clever, as the case may be, but awfully real and of the earth earthy, and then suddenly, it's behind you. You see it all evaporating like mist curling up from a pond in the morning. Then you feel, 'I'm only mist, too,' and wonder how long it will be before *you* evaporate!"

She shivered a trifle. "I don't think life's very nice, really, do you?"

"And I don't think you mean any of that," answered Peggy.

"Oh, yes I do! I mean it all the time in the back of my brain, only I don't go back there very often, because it isn't a sensible thing to do. Sometimes," she went on, musingly, "I wake up in the middle of the night, when it's very black and still, and I hear a train go rushing and thundering through the village, and I think: This earth I'm on, this bed and I in it are, this minute, plunging, like that train, through vast, terrible spaces at a speed of twelve miles a second. Think of it! Oh, no, don't think—don't! It's too mad and senseless, this whole crazy, whirling universe. What we see—the little foolish brick houses and toy trees and oceans and people walking about—that's only a flimsy stage drop let down between us and chaos."

She knocked one little clenched fist upon her open hand. "People *mustn't* think! They'll go insane with questions. The right, brave thing for humans to do is to play the game, body and soul, and enjoy the big show to the limit, and when their minds get restless, give 'em a dose of morphia—whether it's in the form of a bible, or of spiritualism, or some other ism—and then go straight on. Only, I haven't found the proper sedative for mine, yet."

"Nancy, Nancy, hush!" chided Peggy, laying a hand on her arm.

"In a minute, but there's something I want to ask you first." There was something Peggy wanted to ask, too, but she waited patiently, for she was beginning to see, now, at the last, what was on the other side of the wall. Nancy hesitated, arranging her words carefully.

"Do you believe, Peg, that there is a being known as God, directing the universe toward a good end, with personal knowledge of you, and with whom, through prayer, you can commune?"

"Yes," answered Peggy, softly. "I believe just that."

"How wonderful!" said Nancy, plain envy in her voice.

"Why don't you try to believe it, too?"

"I do. I have. All my life. But I go into churches and see the vestments and the candles, the choir-boys marching, the kneeling people making mysterious responses at the right times, and I feel as left out of it all and bewildered as someone looking on at a game and not knowing the rules, or the signals. I guess," with a flicker of ironic humor, "I just belong by nature to that rather large and interesting company, the Lost!"

"Foolish little Nancy girl," smiled Peg, shaking her tenderly. "Hush! Hush!"

Nancy obediently hushed.

Clasping both hands at the back of her neck she raised her head and looked straight up, where a faint, sickle moon was shining in the fast darkening sky. A few feet above her, in the dim doorway,

hung an old stone shield, carved with the arms of the college. She studied it, bending backward and reading it upside down.

"Know thyself," it said.

Nancy laughed, shortly. "I know myself about as well as if I had met me some three or four times at afternoon tea. How well do you know *yourself*, Peg?"

"Hardly at all. No one does. It's too soon."

"Yes," Nancy agreed. "We haven't been out in the 'wide, wide world' yet. Carrollton would be flattered to hear itself so described," she added.

They were silent again, each thinking of the things she could not say, lest the dam of morale break—that this was the end, of everything, it seemed, that never again would they live so goldenly, so intensely, that before them on their separate ways lay uncertainty.

Finally, Peggy roused from reflection and asked her question: "Why are you so down on marriage, Nance? Somehow, I don't think it's just college and this Feminism furore, though I've said so many times. You've got just one big fault, *mon enfant*, you're hipped, gone, half-seas over on the sex question! Has your old-maid cousin drummed it into you, too, or what? It's a queer twist in you that I can never understand any more than I can your skepticism, and that seems to be one of the strongest—well, obsessions with you. Yet you adore children so, and you're all love and warmth

and sweetness, really, in spite of that impish wit of yours. Why is it, Nancy?" urgently.

"Oh, I don't know," said Nancy with impatience. The subject always nettled her, for some reason. "I'm just not interested in it. Too narrowing. As for children, I have a whole town full to love—play with—work for. And the things I know about child welfare, Peg," enthusiastically, "they'd fill a library!"

Peggy looked at her in helpless exasperation and sighed deeply, but it was all lost on Nancy, who continued: "I'm just up on my toes, you know, ready for anything. It's a great way to feel." She reverted: "And why on earth *should* I be interested in marriage, Peg?"

She paused, but only for breath. "Why, I don't even know what myself is like and how far I can go. On my own. See? I have an idea I may go quite a way. It'll be no end amusing, as a side line, to get acquainted with me, not to speak of that same 'wide, wide world.' But you seem, always, to want me to forget all that and just deed myself over to some man, chuck my independence down the cellar and say, 'Here, Mister, *you* run me!' when I'm perfectly capable of running myself and extremely anxious to!" She shook her head emphatically. "You're all off, my dear. Marriage is a profession, like nursing, that suits some and doesn't suit others. I belong to the 'others.' See?"

Peggy did not see. The only thing she saw was the futility of argument.

"And as for love," Nancy's voice dropped, "there's a sonnet of Rupert Brooke's that says what I think about it,

" 'Love is a breach in the walls, a broken gate,
Love sells the proud heart's citadel to Fate.' "

She looked off somberly. "Would you like me to tell you a queer story? It's the last chance I'll have."

Peggy nodded, almost holding her breath, fearing impulse would be chilled by speech.

"It's about my mother," began Nancy. "She was a little, precious, dancing flirt of a girl from Louisiana, with curly black hair and brilliant color. Bewitchingly pretty. I have pictures, and Cousin Lætitia has told me. And then there's a saucy red velvet cap at home with a white quill stuck through it that she wore when she was sixteen and the belle of her tiny town. You can see her in it.

"Her family was descended straight from those delightful and unscrupulous du Rohans of France. Remember the affair of the Cardinal du Rohan and the diamond necklace in Marie Antoinette's time? But then there were some decent Ducs du Rohan, who were fine.

"There were a lot of other French families in this town and the young men in them must have been the most romantic Beau Brummels ever! Poetry! They wrote it by the yard, apparently,

with elaborate inky flourishes, on scrolls of Italian paper, tied with blue and scarlet ribbons. And sometimes these sentimental young things would stand in the magnolia shadows outside her own, and the other girls' windows, and sing their poetry to music in the moonlight!

"Now, my little mother," she continued, with a lingering tenderness in her voice, "was a prim and proper little lady in spite of all this adulation, and her head was carefully clamped down, to prevent its being turned, by *her* mother, who rigidly enforced discipline. She used to have to pay duty calls eternally on tiresome old ladies and invalids, for one thing. The only pleasure she got out of it was in dressing up to the extreme limit of fashion.

"There's one picture at home I wish you could see, Peg. She's about fifteen, I guess, standing between two very artificial flat columns, with an exalted, do-or-die expression! She's all in some sort of billowy, flowered frock, with infinitesimal black slippers, ribbons crossed over white stockinged ankles and the most absurdly adorable black floppy hat, too far back on her head, where the photographer pushed it, you see. Oh! and a reticule—know what they are?—with one careful edge of white handkerchief showing. That picture, to me, is a kind of little vignette of the old world.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Peg?"

Peggy started. "No-o," she said, doubtfully.

"Well, I do—sort of. We've got an old pot-pourri jar at home, very old, my grandmother's,

but still mustily sweet. There must be mignonette, and roses, and lavender, and thyme, and cinnamon, and every other kind of old-fashioned herb in there. Delicious, faint ashes of fragrance! Oh, I can smell it now!" She drew in a long breath.

"Well, long before I ever saw that picture, which a friend of the family's gave me a few years ago, I used to see my little mother, just as she looks in it, every time I shut my eyes and breathed in the odors of the pot-pourri jar. I'll swear I did! I was afraid to do it often. Of course you'll say I had seen the picture once and forgotten about it, but I don't believe it. I believe her little girl ghost haunts that old jar, because she probably adored it so as a child."

Nancy sighed. "I'm dragging, because this is the nice part of the story. The rest isn't.

"At seventeen mother came to Carrollton, to visit a very well-to-do and prominent older sister of her's, who had married there. I have the letters she wrote home.

"On the train she sat fearfully, afraid to breathe for fear of being accosted by some designing masculine 'person' against whom she had been warned. Her hair was hanging down her back in a pig-tail, and she had a death grip on her lunch basket. Near Carrollton, at some fishing place, a lot of young fellows got on the train, with their muddy clothes and boots, tackle, and a seven days' growth of beard. After one glance, mother dear looks haughtily out the window, one of the big, impudent

things having had the nerve to smile at her, *without an introduction!*

"Carrollton was quite fashionable and of the great world—far more so than her little village, and the gentlemen of Carrollton, when they called, found—not the little girl several of them had seen on the train, but a young lady quite up to specifications, with ringletted hair *à la Parisienne*, flowing black lace train (borrowed), fingers glittering to the knuckles—that was her touch, not her amused sister's—*and* so on! She reposed upon the sofa with a Mrs. Siddons-like attitude of hauteur, I gathered, jadedly receiving masculine homage and inwardly bubbling with glee."

Nancy chuckled. "The expression on the face of the 'impudent' fisherman, Peg, when he walked in, must have been a study! Mother wrote that 'Mr. Carroll seemed indeed surprised.' He was big, good-looking Tim Carroll, my father, the catch of the town—witty, wealthy, for those days, at twenty-five, with acres and acres of cotton land on the river.

"They were married three months after her eighteenth birthday and for eight years were pathetically happy, and so much in love that they simply couldn't see anything or anybody else around them, Cousin Lætitia said. It was idolatry, what my mother felt for her husband, she says, with that hint of religious superstition in her voice that I can't shake out of her.

"At the end of this time mother became terribly

ill, every doctor diagnosing differently, and father was agonized for weeks. They performed some kind of operation. Two months later came the great Mississippi floods of that period, the tributary rivers all overflowed and poor father was ruined. He lost everything that year, except the water-sogged land itself. Then he became queer and alarmingly different—got morose and moody, where he'd always been sunshine. Nervous breakdown, they called it.

"Eventually, after a year, he grew somewhat better, but began to do odd, unbusinesslike things—dispose of property in the most off-hand way, for much less than it was worth, and make foolish investments with the proceeds. His friends found him stubborn and unmanageable, full of theories and projects.

"Mother knew nothing of it all. It wasn't the thing for a wife to understand her husband's business. She had almost recovered her health, her husband seemed more like himself and she was raptuously happy because I was going to be born, when she had thought the Lord was never going to send her a child, for some imagined little wickedness on her part.

"One night, about four months before I was born, she was in her room, heard a noise on the stairs and father stumbled in, white as a ghost with some letters in his hand, and fainted on the floor. His investments had all gone to smash. After he recovered consciousness he became delirious, and

he was never fully rational again. He was just hopelessly insane. He had been an only son and was an orphan, so he had no family; but my mother's people, who had moved away, came and took him to a big hospital in Memphis and the doctors shook their heads and sent him home. He died a month before my birth, and my mother, after that, lay in a perfectly dead apathy, not moving for hours at a time. She wanted to die, and so she did—as I was born."

Nancy quivered. "Think of it! To pass her, as I came into life, and not to be able to stop her, when I've needed her so!" There were tears in her eyes. "Wouldn't you think she'd have tried to keep alive, for me?"

After a long while she went on, slowly. "I pity my innocent father. His father and grandfather before him were merely two elegant Southern gentlemen who were never in their lives seen under the influence of liquor, but whose 'toddlies' and juleps and liqueurs were as regular as clockwork, and who could each, one emulating the other's tradition, drink more and carry it off better on a wager than any other men in their counties. You see what they did to him? 'Unto the third and fourth generations'. . . That's all," she finished.

Nancy sat, for a time, without speaking or glancing at Peggy, whose eyes, too, were wet.

"Except," she went on, at last, "that, eugenically speaking, I shouldn't have been born at all,

of course, of a poor little nervous, unhappy mother, and a father who had been drifting into insanity for years. I have felt that, sometimes." She looked away. "I don't suppose you know, Peg, what supreme torture it is to a child just to be *different* from all the others—as to parents—ideas—everything. It—does things to you, I guess."

She straightened her shoulders, seemed to shake off her sadness and depression like something physical, and suddenly looked at Peggy with that defiant, ironic little smile with which she would undoubtedly greet the Archangel Gabriel when he woke her from the tomb and told her to get ready for the Judgment.

"I'm due to be a moron, I believe, Peg," she observed, "from that old strain, or," grimly, "something equally attractive. But, believe *me*, I am 'nary sich a thing'! Nor do I, personally, for all my talk—and leaving my mother out of the question, feel any marked regrets at having been born." Her eyes defied and challenged. "Darn eugenics, anyway, *I* say—trying to reduce the irreducible to charts and diagrams and breeding statistics. I, for one, Peggy Lawton, refuse positively to be a statistic!"

Peggy smiled, rather shakily.

"Just why I was born," Nancy added, "I have not yet discovered. I'm hoping to. But I don't much care why, really. I *am*, and that's enough for me!"

Her voice altered.

"My pitiful little mother!" she said, brokenly. "Love sold *her* citadel to Fate. It won't sell mine. If I see it coming, I shall run. That's all."

For a little while they sat, listening to the far-off snatches of song from groups somewhere on the campus. There was no other sound but the quivering and rustling of the vines on the old walls back of them. The daylight was gone and the stars were crowding out. Nancy stared up at them.

"Oh!" she cried, suddenly, clenching her small hands tight, "I want to *live*—hard, hard. There's the whole beautiful, wonderful earth to see,—thousands of things to find out about! There's wrong to fight and battle—calling you out. I want to crowd every minute full, just soak up life like a sponge, while I'm young and can feel the thrill and wonder of it. Because it *is* wonderful, whether we know any reason for it or not. And maybe, Peg, if I work and fight and suffer, I'll find some sort of reason! My reason, anyway. Maybe, maybe!"

"You will, sweetheart," said Peggy. "I know it."

Nancy did not hear her. She was still looking up at the stars. They gazed indifferently back at her. They had heard that same cry so often from foolish young things in many lands and ages, with that same note of passion and doubt and persistent hope in it!

"I wonder, I wonder," she said, dreamily, "if there are people up there on those stars. Why not? It seems reasonable. Young ones, perhaps, like us

—staring this way and wondering why *they* have been born and what it's all about.

"Well! Mister Mars, Jr., and Miss Venus," she made the starry universe a whimsical little salute, "if you're up there, here's wishing you luck!"

And, oddly enough, those were the last words she heard shouted after her as her train pulled out from the village station the next afternoon, leaving, on the platform, Peggy and the few other girls who meant college to her.

CHAPTER II

BOB PROPOSES, AND NANCY DISPOSES

"De nex' sta-shun will be Ca-a-ollton," announced the colored porter.

Nancy painstakingly powdered a little nose that did not, in spite of the heat, need it, and drew on her gloves. She rose, with a thrill of anticipation and a vast relief that the long dull time of sitting still was over. She was the first passenger out.

Two strong hands suddenly swept her clear of the car steps and a big, sunburned, hatless fellow, in a Panama suit, was smiling down at her with a flash of white teeth and a light in his steady, quizzical brown eyes.

"Hello, Nance!" he said. "This your suit case?" and in the next breath, "Gimme your trunk check!" Nancy laughed and fished for it in her purse as he piloted her through the crowd.

"Efficiency is still your middle name, Bob," she said. "Nice to be taken care of again, though."

Once in Bob's dumpy Hup roadster she squeezed his arm affectionately. "*Nice* old Bob! I've missed you like the divil! Haven't you missed me, too?"

Bob shrugged. "Oh!—slightly," he replied with a fine indifference; and they laughed together.

The car turned into Main Street. It was wide, roughly paved and bordered with irregular one- and two-story brick buildings of assorted colors and ages, emblazoned with large, and occasionally lurid signs. At the head of the street was the gray stone Chickasaw County Court House. The heat waves trembled up hazily from the expanses of brick and stone. Street-cars crawled sleepily along, there were few people and fewer vehicles out. It was June in Carrollton.

Nancy leaned forward and stared about her.

"Bob," she said, "this town always looks to me as if someone had just sat on it. After cities with tall buildings the flatness sort of smites you between the eyes."

"Good thing," he answered. "Distracts your attention from the—er—absence of scenic features."

"Even so," agreed Nancy mournfully.

He smiled at her teasingly with another flash of his firm white teeth.

"'Cheer up, the worst is yet to come,' Nance," he remarked unfeelingly. "Wait till you hear what a bunch of people want you to do down here this summer. You'll be sorry you didn't buy a round-trip ticket."

"I will *not*," declared Nancy indignantly. "I'm no quitter."

He looked as if he were sorry he had spoken.

They stopped before an old wrought-iron gate in a brick wall laden with honeysuckle vines, crêpe myrtle bushes showed above it, and magnolia trees. A long walk of irregular stones led to the high steps of an ancient, white, columned house with green shutters and more vines—jasmine—screening the veranda.

The heavy front door suddenly opened and a little old gray-haired lady in a lavender sprigged white frock and a lacy cap appeared in the doorway. She was like the final satisfactory note of music needed to complete a chord. The picture was perfect, now, until the twentieth century spoiled it by breaking in.

"You darling!" cried Nancy, hugging her, "you look too sweet for anything. . . . Where's Mammy 'Line?"

"Right heah, Honey Chile!" spoke up an old, white-turbaned and very fat negro woman from the rear of the hall. She opened her expansive gingham arms and petted her "chile" adoringly. She had been in the family for twenty-three years and was accorded all the privileges she would take, which were few.

Nancy's Cousin Lætitia fluttered about with tremulous pleasure. Nancy must bathe her perfectly clean face again and "cool off." Was she hungry? No? Then she and Bob must have some lemonade in the library and he must promise to come back for tea. He couldn't? Too bad!

Miss Lætitia did not like most men, but she was

devoted to Bob Singleton. She was rather like a little timid gray kitten who flees tremblingly from the noise and stamping about of the big, rough, masculine creatures. But Bob never stamped about, for all his bigness, and though he puzzled her greatly at times by shouting with laughter when nothing amusing had been said by her, and by making jokes which she politely pretended to understand, she was always reassured by his unfailing gentleness.

He stood talking to her now and Nancy, watching them over her frosty glass, thought how good it was to be seeing Bob's boyish, quick smile light that rather stern brown face of his, with its lean, strong lines and look of humorous keenness that could become grim and hard as easily as it could mellow into geniality, or soften into tenderness.

Cousin Lætitia suddenly bethought herself of several undelivered directions for old Angeline, and left them.

Bob glanced at his watch, lit a cigarette, and sat down.

"Now, Bob!" said Nancy. She leaned forward eagerly. "Have you got a job for me? What is it people want me to do down here this summer?"

She looked so young and wistful, and so little and frail—almost as frail as Miss Lætitia—that Bob's heart suddenly failed him utterly.

"Damn it all, Nance!" he exclaimed abruptly. "Have you *got* to work?"

"How perfectly absurd!" Nancy was aston-

ished. "I *want* to work and you know it! I have to, besides. I owe \$780 for my last year of college, you may remember. But that's only one reason I'm doing it, of course. The main reason is there's nothing else to do worth doing."

Bob was silent.

"Come on, now, be sensible, like a lamb, and tell me what I want to know."

"Well," he began, none too willingly. "If I don't someone else will, I suppose. I'll tell you about that first, and then submit a proposition I've managed to dig up for you.

"Your guardian angel, Nancy, seems to have it in for you—trying to throw you at Jim Protheroe's head just whether or no. There's a frame-up, it appears, and you're the prospective victim, unless you've got the sense to stand out from under, which, of course, you have." He was by no means as certain of that as he sounded.

"This Women's Social Service Society outfit here has been agitating for some months, in the rather futile way they have, trying to stir up interest enough to form some sort of County Welfare Association to raise funds and take care of all charitable work, handle delinquent children in the courts under the new juvenile court law, find jobs, and so on, for county prisoners, and do other little things like that"—ironically—"as these good ladies think them up. The secretary is to be a sort of local representative of the Deity, I have gathered."

Nancy smiled.

"That all sounded harmless enough to me," he continued, "until I found out about two months ago that they were all just sitting down waiting until you got home to 'pass the buck,' make you secretary, and dump the whole project onto *your* massive shoulders to carry off, they being too busy housekeeping and playing bridge to bother with it."

"What fun!" whispered Nancy, under her breath. Her eyes were sparkling.

Bob did not hear her. He went on: "I met Mrs. Montague, the President, you know, on the street one day and asked her for details. She said the plan was to get Chickasaw County to put up half the funds and the city to give whatever the Council would appropriate, and then to raise the rest in one campaign from the church societies and from private subscription.

"I said to her, 'You'd better tackle the present judge, then, Mrs. Montague, if you expect to get any money from the county. Our esteemed friend Jim Protheroe is almost certain to be elected County Judge this fall in spite of everything the decent voters can do, and getting blood out of a turnip would be simplicity itself compared with getting money for charity out of Jim. Moreover,' I told her, 'he'll block any appropriation in the Magistrate's Court. In fact, he'll fight your organization tooth and nail if you go in for prison reform at all and so much as lift a finger to disturb his private and patented little penal system!'

"She wanted to know what I meant—knew nothing about it, apparently, except that it was 'dreadful'; so I told her what I knew, which wasn't much. He runs the County Convict Farm, Nancy, I don't believe you know, on one of his places a few miles out. Bids in the County Court annually for the 'leasing' of the convicts, but at a payment *to him* of so much per head per day—just like stabling cattle. His bid is always the lowest, because he half starves them—negroes and whites alike—and they're miserably clothed and housed, I'm told. In addition, he's Magistrate for his township, besides being chief school director and everything else out there, and at cotton-picking time he sentences all the husky, able-bodied darkies his spies can catch shooting craps or committing other heinous crimes *to* this farm for outrageous terms, and treats them all damnably and works more and more land and gets richer every year. See?

"Well! when I got through telling Mrs. Montague all that, Nancy, what do you think she said to me? It just shows you the type of visionary sentimentalist all those women are.

"Said they knew Mr. Protheroe's reputation and had discussed his probable attitude, realizing that his coöperation as County Judge would be 'vital,' especially since there would be no county funds available until he came in, and that they had tentatively agreed to request the new secretary, when selected, to go quietly out to his township,

before opening the Association's office, and make a study of the poor whites out there so as to be able to give him facts and figures based on his own neighborhood. Said the worker might teach the summer session of Protheroe's school——"

"But he wrote me he had a teacher," Nancy interrupted.

"He hasn't, though. He'd say anything, you know."

Bob proceeded, obviously with dogged determination to have it out:

"Or the worker could, Mrs. Montague said, go out in some capacity that would serve as a blind for her real purpose. She said—this is the point—they all felt that what 'poor benighted Mr. Protheroe' needed was to be 'socialized,' and a practical demonstration like that of need for this work ought to bring him around. Jim Protheroe 'socialized'! I managed not to laugh."

"I've seen him only once," said Nancy, "but you don't forget his face. It's like cast iron and granite and all the other flinty substances you've ever seen. I should say that Mr. Protheroe won't be socialized this side of heaven—or the other place. Still, Bob, I think the plan of a preliminary survey out there is all right, don't you? Especially if the school job is available. Dandy training, and the worker might keep her eyes open to advantage."

"Yes," he answered, rather irritably. "It's all right, Nancy, except for two things—their

choice of you as a secretary, and the total impossibility of the entire scheme."

Now "impossible" was an unfortunate word for Bob to have used with this particular young woman. She sat up a little straighter and took a deep breath. "Go on, Bob, give me *your* proposition, now," she demanded. "I think this is all very thrilling, you know!" And she gave an excited little laugh, clasped both hands about one knee, and leaned back to listen again.

Bob's "proposition" was a good, safe, tangible offer from the State Department of Labor to pay fifty dollars a month on the salary of a woman inspector for Chickasaw and two nearby counties, who should enforce the provisions of the State Child Labor and Woman's Minimum Wage laws. Bob had been talking to the City School Board members and was convinced they would also put up fifty dollars a month if the Inspector could serve as truant officer in the city schools.

"They'll never do it," declared Nancy. "They turned me down once."

"They *will* do it," Bob retorted. "I've got exactly seven votes on that Board to date."

Nancy chuckled delightedly. "You nice old shady politician. I love your methods!"

They discussed the position at length, Bob pointing out its highly desirable features—contact with state and city officials, and so on. Bob was no diplomat. He did it just a trifle too well, and Nancy began to smile.

"Why are you so afraid I'll take the other one, my dear?" she asked, finally.

Bob got up suddenly and walked to a window and back. He was frowning.

"There's a reckless, adventurous streak in you, Nancy, and that kind of Quixotic crusade to right the wrong appeals to one side of you. I don't say you couldn't put it over. Of course it isn't really impossible, as I called it. Nothing is. You might stir up enough sentiment to handle Jim Protheroe and do a number of things.

"But that job will wear you—body and spirit. You'll have to deal with the scum of the earth—those convicts and county paupers—and you'll have for an antagonist the shrewdest old devil in seven states.

"As I wrote you, I can't bear to think, Nancy, of your having anything to do with a low-down scoundrel like Jim Protheroe! If those confounded women would only let you alone—" He strode up and down angrily. "*They'll* sit placidly at home and rock and send a little high-strung, sensitive kid like you out to do the dirty work. They make me sick." He said it viciously, between his teeth.

Nancy laughed at him with teasing tenderness. "You funny, dear old thing! Why don't you practice what you preach? You're every bit as high-strung as I am, under that iron control of yours. And if you ever spare *yourself* I have yet to find it out. I've sat out at that City Hospital on visits, at rush times, and seen you go from one major

operation into another, white as a sheet beneath that tan, and traveling on your nerve, while your assistants were still cheerful and buxom. Why? Because *you* were operating with your soul as well as your hands, and they weren't. You're a fine one to talk to me!"

"That's different," he responded. "I'm a man and I can st——"

Nancy stopped him.

"And I'm a person, as you are," she stated defiantly. "I don't ask quarter because I'm a woman, Bob."

"You don't have to," he said quietly. "Nature does it for you."

She was silent, if unconvinced.

"It'll be a fight from a start to finish and that's the most wearing thing in the world," he added.

"It's the most common thing in the world," Nancy answered him. "I think *I've* been fighting ever since I was born."

"Yes, I know, dear," said Bob, unhappily, with a break in his voice, "and that's why I want——"

He stopped, walked over to the window and stood there a moment, with his back to her, staring out. His heart was bothering him exceedingly. It was leaping like a wild thing on a tether, at the jab of a sudden resolution. But when he turned he remarked coolly, with his smile intact: "You said there was nothing else to do here worth doing. You might marry me, you know."

Nancy laughed lightly.

"Sweet of you!" she said, with effusiveness. "Downright considerate. Suppose I called your bluff, though? Now, *wouldn't* that be awkward—?"

"Suppose I wasn't bluffing?"

He had ceased to smile.

Nancy reached him in some four steps.

"Stop it!" she ordered, shaking him by both arms. "Stop it—*stop* it! In about a minute, Bob, you're going to persuade yourself that you mean it, just out of pure worry for me, and nothing could make me crosser or more upset!" She became argumentative. "I've boasted about us so, as the one pair I knew with any sense, and if you go spoiling it now— Behave, you hear me, Mister?"

She was laughing up straight and candidly into his face.

Bob managed an excellent smile, put a hand over one of hers and patted it, rather absently, then drew back and looked at his watch.

"I must go," he said briefly. "Consultation." He studied her.

"Promise me just this one thing, Nancy, that you will try to keep an open mind about all this business and make no decision as to your work until you have *thoroughly*," he dwelt upon the word, "investigated all offers made you."

"Fair enough," Nancy agreed. "I promise."

He got half way down the long walk and came back to say:

"Stay indoors for several days, Nance, and give

yourself time to get used to this heat. There's danger in coming into it from a much colder climate."

She looked up at him saucily.

"Say, Mister—is that an order or a request?"

"An order."

She salaamed profoundly and he strode away, the quick smile that etched his bronzed face into fine lines of humor being instantly succeeded by a troubled frown.

Nancy, left alone, and finding her Cousin Lætitia taking a siesta, did two things. She telephoned Mrs. Montague and asked that perspiring lady some twenty questions, and she hunted up a certain book and opening it at a section entitled, "Rural Education in the United States," sat down to read.

She also did a third thing of which, to do her justice, she was not conscious. She decided, somewhere in her brain, in which, by the way, was not a remaining ripple of concern for Bob Singleton's matrimonial suggestions, that she was going to teach the ill-famed Mr. Jim Protheroe's school, as originally intended, but in the capacity of Secretary of the Chickasaw County Public Welfare Association!

CHAPTER III

JIM PROTHEROE SIGNS ON THE DOTTED LINE

EXACTLY one week later Nancy sat in the dark, musty parlor of Jim Protheroe's house in the country, gazing curiously about her and waiting for him to come in from his farm and engage her to teach his school for the next three months.

Mrs. Montague's seventeen-year-old son, James, was waiting for her outside in a rattle-trap roadster that Mrs. Montague was pleased to refer to as "the car."

Through the window blinds she could see Jimmy, reclining on about his sixth vertebra, with long legs draped around the steering-wheel, hat over his eyes, filling the air with ragtime melody. Jimmy was certainly the only interesting thing in sight, she reflected. The "parlor" was as stuffy and funereal as a family vault. From Nottingham lace curtains to worn Brussels rug, past unspeakable "paintings," and dusty vases of violently pink cloth roses the eye traveled, finding no place to rest.

If the Protheroes had money they must keep it all in the cellar, Nancy decided.

She leaned back in the uncomfortable haircloth

rocky, very hot, and a bit tired. It had been what she called a "hectic" week. First she and Mrs. Montague and the Secretary of the S.S.S., a clever little woman, whose name was Lucy Gatewood, had hung heatedly over the telephone the better part of two days, inviting, or rather imploring, the ministers, doctors, church society leaders, and other notables, to come to an "organization" meeting at the Chamber of Commerce.

Eighteen people, out of the one hundred and sixty asked, showed up, with the air of martyrs and much waving of palm-leaf fans. Nothing daunted, however, the executive Mrs. Montague, who had been greatly maligned by a prejudiced Bob, "steam rolled" the convention to the Queen's taste. A carefully coached nominating committee brought in a carefully preconceived slate; the few officers present took their seats; Miss Carroll was unanimously chosen as General Secretary, at a salary of \$150 per month, her duties to begin October 1st, October 5th was selected as the date of the first annual mass meeting which was to launch the finance campaign—and the deed was done.

"Presto, just like that!" said Nancy gleefully to Bob. "And now I'll trouble you for two hundred dollars, please!"

He grinned, and signed up.

There had only remained Mrs. Montague's scheme, insisted upon by Nancy, for a preliminary survey of the "poor whites" in the upland town-

ships, the "pine flats" west of town. The tactful little Mrs. Gatewood had been delegated to call upon the notorious Mr. Protheroe and propose as teacher for the summer session of his district school, "a little friend, splendidly qualified, in need of the work, who has previously written you about it," namely, Nancy. Because of this complication nothing had been given the newspapers concerning her selection as Secretary of the new Association.

Mrs. Gatewood had returned, beaming, from a successful interview and everybody had congratulated everybody else upon the fine examples of Machiavellian strategy.

Nancy, then, had come out merely to receive her contract, fix the terms of salary, and so on. It was all very simple and dull, she thought, yawning. She was inclined to consider Bob rather silly to have made such a fuss about the whole business. Perhaps, even, Mr. Protheroe wasn't as bad as . . .

The gentleman himself, a grizzled, thick-set, roughly dressed man of about fifty, entered at that moment and shook hands cordially. "Sorry to have kept you waiting like this, Miss Nancy," he apologized, "but one of our mules" . . . and he was off on a detailed explanation.

Nancy studied him from behind her look of fixed, bright interest, but could make nothing new out of his face, the most expressionless she had ever seen. When he disposed of the mule to his satisfaction he began affably on the weather before she could

get in a word. She was puzzled. He had a reputation for glum taciturnity with strangers. (About two hours later she hit upon the proper explanation—extreme cordiality in order to soften a blow and thereby reduce troublesome reactions. There always was an explanation, by the way. Jim Protheroe never did anything without a motive.)

Finally, Nancy rushed into an opening.

"I know you're busy, Mr. Protheroe, but I won't keep you long. Mrs. Gatewood told me you had Leen good enough to promise that you would put me on at your district school out here for the session beginning on the first of July, so I came out to see about the contract, terms, and so on." She smiled at him winningly. "I think I can 'give satisfaction' and I should, of course, expect to receive at least the salary paid your last teacher, seventy-five a month, I believe."

Protheroe was silent for a moment.

"Miss Nancy," he began, with a great affectation of embarrassment, "I'm extremely sorry to tell you that when I consulted the other directors after talking to Mrs. Gatewood they were dead against my proposition to hold a summer session." Nancy had heard of the convenient "other directors"; one was a negro, representing a negro school in the district, the other a doddering old soul who owed Protheroe money. "You see," he proceeded, "we've already had a three months' school this year, and starting in October we'll have another. There's no winter session on account of bad

weather. Six months' school in the year is all the law requires." Nancy knew that to be true.

"They seemed to feel," Protheroe continued, "that the district wouldn't stand for it. They're an ignorant lot, you know." He shook his head sadly over the shortcomings of the district. "We have a hard time giving them any education at all."

Nancy's mind was working overtime. Protheroe had, of course, since talking to Mrs. Gatewood, heard of her selection as Secretary of the County Association. Perhaps the whole scheme had leaked. How, she couldn't imagine, but—well! There was nothing to be gained by argument with him, and she *mustn't* show her hand.

She rose, with dignity. "I understand your attitude fully, I think, Mr. Protheroe," she said. "Let us hope the other directors' decision is not final," and, biting her lips to keep from saying more, she was bowed out.

The front door closed behind her with a maddening sound of finality.

Nancy found herself standing on the sunny porch with somewhat the sensation a champion prize-fighter might have who had just been knocked out on the first round by some nobody from nowhere! Checkmate—in the neatest way—on the very opening move in the game! She was stunned.

Her eyes fell upon the recumbent James in his tinny equipage. She hesitated a minute, then went quickly out to him and he sprang down to put her into the machine.

Nancy took hold of one wobbly fender and jiggled it up and down thoughtfully.

"This is an old Ford, isn't it, Jimmy?" she inquired.

"I'll *say* it is!" replied Jimmy, with disgust. The dream of his life was a Buick Six.

"A Ford will go anywhere, won't it?" and, without waiting for an answer, "Jimmy! Are you game to do something with me?"

"Sure!" he said instantly. "What is it?"

"Get in and drive me back to that little store we passed at the crossroads and I'll tell you as we go along."

She talked rapidly and Jimmy, listening with a grin, nodded shrewdly now and then. "We can telephone your mother from the store," she finished, "and if she doesn't object, we can go ahead."

"You 'phone her, then," he said, with a wariness born of long experience, "while I see if I can buy the paper and stuff."

The "store" was a stale-smelling, sawdusty little place, selling everything from safety pins and sorghum molasses to wagon tops. Jimmy, in the rear, purchased from a tow-headed urchin a pen and bottle of ink, two indelible pencils, a pencil tablet, and a quire of foolscap paper of the kind sacred to examinations, while Nancy, at the telephone, spoke guardedly, and, finishing, engaged the storekeeper, a cheerful, garrulous old chap, in conversation.

As Jimmy passed her on his way to the porch he

hissed from one side of his mouth in a low, intense tone, "Got 'em," then settled himself on a box just outside the door, within earshot, sharpened a pencil and prepared to take surreptitious notes. Jimmy was enjoying life. He felt exactly like a Sherlock Holmes story.

"I wonder if you can tell me," Nancy was saying artfully to the storekeeper, "how to get to a little piece of land that belongs to me" (that much was true), "between the Still Bayou Railway Station and that brickyard in this township? If you could give me the names of some of the families along the road between here and there, they could show me the way, perhaps."

The old fellow was plainly delighted to exhibit his knowledge of the "deestrick" to so interested a stranger. "Well! thar's Crawford's folks on a forty jest this side o' Ed Higgins' place right next the station," and he reeled out the desired names and directions, Jimmy scribbling industriously the while. To the tow-headed child, who followed him out curiously, he explained that he was writing a letter to his mother. "Where do *you* live, sonny?" he asked, and took that down, too, with elaborate carelessness.

"There are some nice-looking places just up the road," said Nancy, "and then a very poor looking one, next. Who lives up there?"

She found that out; she also found out, by a series of adroit queries, who were friendly to Mr. Protheroe and who were not. The latter, to her

delight, were overwhelmingly in the majority. Perhaps the most valuable fact gleaned was that school elections would be held within two months and that there was much grumbling among the women folk in the district about the present management. "But Lord!" said the old fellow disgustedly, "too many men in this deestrick owes Jim Protheroe money for them to be votin' him out o' office, jest to please their wives. They ain't any crazier about Jim than the women is, but they're skeered of him, and he votes 'em like sheep."

Nancy and James departed jubilant, laden with information, crackers, and deviled ham—likewise soda-pop. They drew up in the shade after a while, got out the ink and foolscap paper and Nancy lettered a neat heading on one sheet, which said:

"We, the undersigned white residents, and taxpayers of School District 21, Township 2, Chickasaw County, do hereby earnestly petition the school directors of the said district to open the Red Hill District School for a summer session of three months beginning July 1, 1911, and we do also, and hereby, pledge ourselves to require the children whose names follow our own to attend school regularly during that period, should the said session be held.

"Signed:"

"Oughtn't there to be a 'whereas' or two?" asked Jimmy anxiously. "It don't sound legal

enough to me, somehow." But they saw no place to put one in and proceeded on their way.

Leaving the families known to be favorable to the Protheroes until the last—from a vague fear of leakage and counter-attack—they took the pike first and gathered a fine crop of friendly signatures from the comparatively prosperous homes along it—Nancy was the one who made notes now, after they left each place.

Once in the pine woods they got lost, frequently, at crossroads, and had to be guided back to safety by some native. Every now and then they would glimpse a clearing, and making for it, find the usual truck patch, scraggly peach and apple trees, plot of corn and pea vines, surrounding some unpainted shanty guarded by the inevitable and vociferous hound, or cur dog, dragging his block and chain. The residents would erupt from the front door excitedly, or sometimes suspiciously. In one or two places it seemed to Nancy that babies and little, dirty, barefoot children were fairly bursting out of the cracks in the walls.

She found in remote, inaccessible cabins, shock-headed children of twelve and over who had never seen the inside of any schoolhouse, and all the diplomacy and persuasiveness she owned was needed to overcome the hostility of their mothers or loafing, tobacco-spitting fathers. Most of the women she thought vastly more intelligent and energetic than the men. They plowed and sawed up stove wood and kept the houses and gardens,

apparently, while their husbands hauled logs—felled by the mill sawyers—to several lumber mills nearby, nodding sleepily in their seats as their mules crawled along the road.

She and Jimmy picnicked hilariously under the pines and after a “check-up” fared stoically forth again.

“Liz, old girl, you’re doin’ noble,” remarked Jimmy approvingly, as he seized the steering wheel. “Go to it, now.” And Lizzie went—charging up the steep banks of dried creek beds with a snort and arriving—dizzy but game—at the top, amid shrieks and chuckles of laughter from Nancy and James who were, by now, in that state of foolish good humor that laughs at anything.

They came away from the next place, however, thoroughly sobered and thoughtful. It was a ramshackle, leaky shack and its inmates a sallow sick woman dragging wearily about with a half-starved baby in her arms, two little children hiding behind her skirts, another dull-eyed, thin girl about fourteen, and a tousled-haired Huck Finn kind of a boy, a little older, whom Nancy loved at sight. His name was Billy and the family’s name Conroy.

“Gosh!” observed Jimmy appalled, “How can people *live*, as miserable as all that?” And a second time, “Gosh!”

Nancy was busily making a special note to return as soon as possible with food and clothes. At the top of her sheet she had written.

"C. C. Pub. Welf. Assn. Case I," and a little further down, "Have Bob test for hookworm and malaria."

At 6:30 Nancy crossed the last name off a much-amended list, and weary, but triumphant, announced, "James Montague, at this point we call it a day."

"All through?" he asked, surprised. "We going home now?"

"No, my child," said Nancy. "We are not. We are going to Mr. Protheroe's now to get that contract," and she seized the little mirror in her purse, and began to remove streaks of dust from her hot face.

Forty minutes later she made a surprised gentleman a carefully rehearsed little speech.

"After I left you this morning, Mr. Protheroe," she stated sweetly, "I thought over what you had said and it seemed such a shame to me for those poor people to be losing, simply through ignorance, the benefits of the education you were trying to give them; so I decided I would go to see some of them and attempt to persuade them to back you up in this matter. You will be pleased to learn that I found them, without exception, not only willing but anxious to coöperate, once they understood matters." She accented the last two words slightly. "This petition," Nancy handed it to him and he took it dazedly, "is the result. I think you will find there the signatures or marks of one or both of the parents of every child of school age

in the district and the names of forty-two children whom they agree to send to school—as you see, beginning July 1st.

“You will also find” (to save her life Nancy could not keep a faint note of triumph out of her voice), “on another sheet, here,” she showed it to him, “the signatures of the other two school-directors and a little written statement from them—you see?—to the effect that, provided you are willing, they will be glad to open the school for a summer session and sign a contract with me as teacher.”

She added: “They said I could simply bring them the contract, signed by you, to sign, and that would save having a board meeting. That about covers matters, doesn’t it, Mr. Protheroe, and furnishes you with all the backing needed?”

He made no answer. He was studying the petition, name by name. When he looked up his face was as granite-like and expressionless as before.

“School takes up at nine sharp next Monday,” he said gruffly. “There’s a buggy and mare for the use of the teacher, but you’ll have to stable it yourself.” He turned on his heel and left the room.

Nancy gasped. She wondered if he had gone for a gun, or a bull-dog, maybe. But he had merely gone for the contract.

It was eight o’clock when Jimmy handed her gallantly up her front steps to a distracted Cousin Lætitia.

"Jimmy," she said to him, gripping his hand, "you've been a sport and a gentleman." And Jimmy, steering the prostrated Lizzie homeward, remarked to himself with an admiring chuckle, "*Some* girl!"

CHAPTER IV

AN A.B. DEGREE IN THE BACKWOODS

IF she lived to be a hundred Nancy Carroll knew she would not forget the utter misery of her first day in the Red Hill District School.

It was a quarter to eight o'clock when she drove the little mare smartly over the crest of the long, gravelly clay hill that gave the little one-room schoolhouse on top its name. To her amazement she found three vehicles hitched to trees before the schoolhouse—a logging team, a quite grand family "surrey" and horse, and a dilapidated "buggy" to which a large white mule was attached by harness, patched with rope. The yard seemed full of running, shouting children and, standing about, sitting on the front steps and in the "surrey" were, obviously, parents.

Nancy's heart gave a sickening thump. She had not counted on parents, as audience, and she had pictured the children as pathetic, mouselike little creatures, raising shy, appealing eyes to her awesome heights of worldly wisdom. But, great heavens! One of those big Amazons in the yard must be twenty, if she was a day, and at least three—she counted—of the boys were a full

head taller than she. And noisy! This was a *Situation!*

She hitched the mare and walked, with camouflaged calmness, to the gate. Dead silence ensued. Some twenty-five pairs of eyes focused on her.

"Good morning, everybody," she said, brightly, and then wondered if that was too informal—if she should have said, for instance—oh! dear! She found herself shaking hands cordially with parents she would far rather have punched, and being introduced one by one to the children. Snickers and giggles from the environs followed each hand-shaking.

On the edge of the crowd, on the boys' side, she saw Billy Conroy, looking clean and horribly uncomfortable in a suit of James Montague's she had taken him. Billy was clinging to a tree trunk with one arm and he had the reluctant, frightened look of some wild thing strayed in from the woods to a barnyard and, lingering, half attracted, half repelled, ready for instant flight. Her heart yearned over Billy as she patted his shoulder and whispered encouragement to him.

More children and parents arrived—a whole wagon bed full of them. Two tiny babies in the group added to the general good cheer by shrieking loudly and without intermission. Their mothers didn't seem to mind in the least. Both babies were dressed in turkey-red calico, which might, Nancy thought, have a great deal to do with their ill-humor.

After what seemed several hours it was ten minutes to nine, and Nancy rang the first "get-ready" bell. "They'll go now," she thought, hopefully—meaning the parents; but no indeed! To a parent, they came chattily inside, babies and all, and ranged themselves around the wall on extra chairs and a long bench. "Like a funeral," reflected Nancy, "with me for the corpse." And she had an hysterical urge to laugh aloud.

The noise from the school yard redoubled. Nancy set her little chin grimly, seized the bell—a primitive hand affair—and marched to the door.

"Boys line up on this side—girls on that," she ordered, crisply, and the straggling, serrated lines somehow got themselves inside.

Then—oh, horror!—there arose much din and tumult in the land, on account of seats! Two main factions could be distinguished—that claiming the right to sit "just where they did before" and another insisting on a new deal all around, while a minority party strenuously represented that *it* wanted to "sit with Jessie—or Willy"—as the case might be, "please, Miss Nancy." That matter having been settled by the application of that great democratic principle—compromise—which satisfied nobody, the roll was called. There were present twenty-nine, out of the forty-two children in the small district who had been listed as eligible, and two older ones who had not been listed—thirty-one. Ages ranged from "six next birthday" to twenty. Nancy had a thrill of pride; the last

teacher's daily average had been seven pupils. She resolved strenuously to pursue the lost sheep and perfect her attendance.

Following roll call there was a heavy silence while Nancy put her roll book away in a leisurely manner, wondering frantically, what under heaven she was supposed to do next! Parents and children regarded her with a hopeful solemnity. She had a panicky thought that maybe she was expected to lead them in prayer. It was plainly time for "exercises" of some sort, however. She rose.

"How many of you know the first and last verses of *My Country 'Tis of Thee?*"

A forest of hands waved in the air—and a moment later the anthem was suffering in some six or eight keys, while the terrified babies, awakened, added piercing wails.

Afterwards Nancy managed a little speech, which was roundly applauded, and in quite a pleased, self-satisfied glow she got down to business and began calling children to the desk one by one to grade them.

Chaos, utter and abysmal, ensued. There were no grades—there never had been any grades. Jessie Higgins had "got as far as Paul Revere in the Fourth Reader" and was in the "middle of long division when school let out," but Tad Crawford, who was in fractions, was also in the Fourth Reader only there "wasn't any Paul Revere in *his* book." Nancy counted six different styles of readers. Spellers, "jogaphys," arithmetics, were almost as

variegated. Physiology, hygiene, nature-study, agriculture, penmanship, primary work, drawing, were unknown arts and sciences, apparently. Yet a bill for compulsory county uniformity of textbooks had passed the last Legislature and she held a list of excellent approved books in her hand. Not one could be found in the piles of ancient volumes before her. Jim Protheroe, again, with his traditional facility in evading inconvenient laws.

Nancy had no definite idea as to which children could afford to buy new books and which couldn't, and of course it would never do to ask before all those watching eyes. It was clear to her, already, that there were almost as many social castes as there were children in the room. The seating incidents had been illuminating. Class consciousness was a ghost to be laid, not stimulated. Somehow, she climbed painfully out of her quagmire at last to find, to her relief, most of the parents departed and, to her dismay, most of the demoralized children in a sort of low-keyed uproar.

Nancy, with a once-read description of wild-animal training dimly present in her mind, endeavored to quell them with one calm, consciously superior glance. They wouldn't quell a little bit. She then began the appeal to reason, describing her difficulties and the need for their coöperation, but one Liney Vinson, the largest Amazon, unimpressed, asked aggrievedly, "Ain't we gonna have no recess, Miss Nancy?" and Nancy, with a start of horror, rang the recess bell—forty minutes late.

Afternoon, in the sun-scorched, suffocating schoolroom, shut up with the feverish children, most of them industriously "showing off," was a daytime nightmare. But it was over at four.

Miss Carroll, Secretary-elect of the Chickasaw County Public Welfare Association, Bachelor of Arts, Feminist, and Apostle of Modernism, backslid a good half century on the way home and wept helplessly in the most Mid-Victorian fashion. She was furious with herself, the next moment, and savagely mopped the tears from her hot cheeks with a wilted handkerchief.

The mare, whose name was Bessie, jogged along evenly through sun and shade. After a time the peace of the pinewoods laid a quieting hand on Nancy. She began to smile and her face was suddenly very sweet. She was remembering three things: How Billy Conroy had thrust into her startled hand at the end of the noon hour a damp, clammy object wrapped in newspaper, with the brief explanation, "He's fresh—jest ketched him," and then vanished.

How she had looked up once, in the maddening midst of the afternoon, to find two soft, lovely brown eyes in a pensive face, amazing in its pale beauty and pure, delicate perfection of line, fixed upon her adoringly and—she could swear—understandingly. Nancy had smiled back gratefully into the eyes and the girl's face had flushed as she shyly dropped her head again. Her name was Alice Madden, and though she had a good mother

her father was a worthless, poverty-stricken drunkard. "A wild, white violet in these woods," Nancy had said to herself. "How did she happen?"

And the third thing she remembered was her little group of primary babies, sitting—patient and good—all the long day through, with their one book—a red-backed primer—open before each one, eagerly or dully following stubby little pointing fingers as their lips moved busily. Nancy suddenly whipped up the placid Bessie to a faster trot. She had textbooks to order and much to do for those same babies before nightfall.

"And the evening and the morning were the first day," she wrote that night to Peg Lawton, with weary irreverence, adding, "And, let us devoutly hope, the worst day."

But the hope was a vain one. Fully two months later she said tragically to Bob Singleton as they were out for one of their frequent evening drives in his car, "I suppose the trouble is that I haven't any character."

"What have you done with the perfectly good one you've always had?" inquired Bob, interestedly. The darkness obligingly hid his smile.

"Yes," said Nancy, with a bitter cynicism, "I thought I had one, too, and I thought I understood children, and I thought the High School Board members were old-fogy simpletons to be turning *me*—Nancy Carroll!—down, and I thought a lot of things—and I think I'm a fool."

"Unfailing evidence of wisdom," observed Bob,

cheerfully. "Why do you think you're not a success though, Nance? After that exhibit of yours last week and those magnificent compositions," he chuckled reminiscently, "I should think you'd be all set up."

Nancy's school had just taken the rural school prize at the County Fair for the best all-around exhibit of work, and the children's "compositions," quoted everywhere, had brought joy to the town. Billy Conroy's was entitled, quite simply, "Sqrles" and his remarkably observant bit of nature study began: "There is fore kinds of Sqrles and all nice."

Little Tad Crawford, a quaint and dreamy youngster whom Nancy adored, had submitted the following ingenuous and startling narrative: "Once upon a time there was a pore young man and he was in love with the dar-ter of a rich, candy man. But he had no money and could not get married. The darter of the rich candy man was so anxious to marry him that she put a million dollars in a purse and dropped it where the pore young man would find it. He did and they got married. And the next day they had twins."

Nancy smiled, in spite of herself. "Those compositions *were* nice, weren't they? That ends all right—the work, I mean. They're learning an astonishing lot, and they're every one interested."

"So much for that, then," said Bob, determined to encourage. "Now, how many mothers did you tell me you had in your School Improvement Association?"

"Twenty-six, ranging from Mrs. Vinson, who smokes a corn-cob pipe, to Mrs. Higgins, who wears jet earrings and owns a pianola. But you know, Bob," she added, forgetting her troubles, "it's a case of the Colonel's Lady and Judy O'Grady. It's more fun to watch those women get all warmed up over something and forget all about the pipe and the earrings!

"In the midst of a hot discussion of Mr. Protheroe's failings Mrs. Vinson will sing out, belligerently, '*I says to him, says I,*' and Mrs. Higgins'll hitch her chair up nearer and nod her head till the earrings jangle and say, emphatically, '*An' a good thing too, Sarah Vinson!*'" She laughed wickedly. "We're laying up trouble for that gentleman in District 21, believe me! We may not be able to lick him in school elections next month, but his sentence is passed. He's a doomed man!"

"How do you manage to preach sedition under his nose?"

"I don't. They do all the talking. I only show them what decent work is, as against the kind they've always had, and tell 'em to insist on a real teacher after me. Got her all picked out for 'em, in fact."

"Does Protheroe ever come around?"

"Not he! But he knows everything that goes on, just the same. His children drop things every now and then. Nice children, too. I'm sort of baffled about Protheroe," she went on slowly. "He's a slippery kind of eel. You can't lay your

hands on anything definite he's done. I went out there, you know, almost as much to get things on him that would be useful when we go for him later, as to learn conditions around here, and I haven't gotten a thing. I go in home after home and he's always one subject of conversation. There are tales, rumors, any number, but all hearsay. That convict farm, for instance, is 'way back, several miles—nobody knows just where—across the river. The only road to it runs through Protheroe's farm and his darkies open all the gates. Nobody in the county has ever seen it, so far as I can learn, except that wretched Sheriff he elected, they say. It's a kind of mysterious country, 'from whose bourn no traveler returns,' apparently. I'd give anything to get over there. If we could *only* get something damaging before the county primaries."

She stopped, thinking.

"And is that why you're dissatisfied with yourself as a teacher and 'uplifter'?" Bob queried. "Surely you're un——"

"Oh! no, no," cried Nancy, her all but forgotten woes sweeping over her again in a flood. "It's not any of those things—and I admit I'm a good social worker and know how to teach."

She was so entirely serious that Bob shouted.

"Well, I *am*! I mean I *do*. It's this discipline business that has me stumped! I haven't got those children under control, Bob." There was a note of desperation in her voice. "I *can't* seem to grasp the trick. I've seen the stupidest teachers in the

public schools do it with the utmost ease, yet I can't. I'm expecting any day to have Mr. Protheroe inform me, with some justice, that my services are unsatisfactory. The country youngsters are dears, most of them, and they love me. I could handle them, I think, maybe. But there are a few families of hybrids—half town, half country—out there, and the children, all girls, are little devils. They turn up their malicious noses at my backwoodsmen and insult them daily, then get into the most noble, self-righteous rages when anyone retorts. They start scandals and dark, whispered rumors; they make scenes; they keep the place in an emotional ferment. Every child in it is affected. Why, Bob! the other morning when I got there I found Alice—my gentle, sensitive little wild-flower Alice—smashing Lena Benson—that's the ring-leader—against a tree with a perfectly tigerish savagery. Lena had taunted her about her father. I don't think she will any more."

"Why don't you smash Lena, too?" suggested Bob.

"I'd like to—but she's too big. She's thirteen and her two sisters are bigger, and almost as bad." Nancy sighed deeply. "I cry every afternoon, regularly, Bob, on the way home," she confessed, shamefacedly. And then her humor, never very far below the surface, glinted a moment, for she added, calmly, "I find it relaxes me, like massage."

"You're ado—" began Bob, impetuously, but he substituted, "a dandy kid, and mighty game,

but Lord! how I hate it for you, Nance, dear." He sounded as unhappy as she.

"Nonsense! It's good for my soul! Mammy Line says, by way of consolation," she continued, "that I oughtn't to expect to do anything with 'po' white trash kids,'" and she laughed rather ruefully.

She was careful not to quote the remainder of Mammy Line's very pointed remarks.

"How you spec you gwine manage a lot uh chillen like 'at, Honey," she had said, "when you ain' never had none uh yo' own and don't know nuffin 'tall 'bout 'em? Answer me dat! Chillens ain' so easy to manage, nohow," she proceeded. "Dey has curous, *contrary* ways, chillens has, and dey ain' none of 'em lil' angels—not by uh jugful! I'se had six, an' I knows. You ain' neber gwine unnerstan' 'em, chile, 'twel you has some uh yo' own. You lissen to yo' Mammy!"

Looking back, much later, Nancy remembered that Mammy Line had been the very first of the series of people and events that had said to her, "You don't understand."

CHAPTER V

THROUGH THE WINDOWS OF THE CONVICT CAMP

THERE is a great deal of talk, always, about the beauty and simplicity of rural life. Prominent statesmen, with tears in their eyes, tell about the idyllic days when they, as barefoot, ragged school-boys, walked ten miles or so daily in their Lincolnesque zeal for learning, to that "little red schoolhouse on the hill." They urge the country's youth to go "back to the farm"; they underwrite Back-to-Nature societies. But it is to be noted that few of these gentlemen live on the farms where they were born and to which they are so patriotically anxious to send others. One may find them in Chicago or Atlanta, New York or Des Moines, but seldom in their native villages—unless speaking from the rear platforms of trains in campaigns for reëlection.

Nancy decided in the teeth of public opinion, that the rural neighborhood, as then constituted in many states no better or worse than hers, was, from all her information and experience, the worst possible place for a boy or girl to be. She knew families with as much as a hundred acres of land whose houses swarmed with flies, whose babies died

numerously of typhoid and "summer complaint" from polluted well-water and other causes, whose mothers were haggard drudges at thirty-one, and whose sons, in their off times, gambled, drank "boot-leg" whiskey and did worse things, solely for lack of something better to do, while their daughters, once in a while, went pitifully "wrong" for similar reasons. These were the mass in the Red Hill district. There were true children of the woods like Billy and Alice Madden, there were numbers of the instructed and thrifty. But they were exceptions.

Nancy daily waged a pitched battle with the evil, presiding spirit of the rural neighborhood—Ignorance. She knew that the sort of people who ought to go "back to Nature" were not more boys and girls but the right kind of "uplifters," to make Nature a decent nurturing place for children. For herself, she loved it. She would have liked to live in a house in a pine tree lined with bookshelves—hermit-like—provided there had been no such disagreeable things in the world as ambitions and duties and ideals. At least, that was the way she felt most of the time now, say from nine to four.

Nancy's school was flourishing like the green bay-tree, if Nancy was not. By the use of divers and desperate expedients, such as a county pension for the Conroys to permit the children to come, she had maintained a large attendance, thus increasing her difficulties. To her distress, then, one morning early in September she found her faithful man

Friday—Billy Conroy—missing. So was his sister. The children could throw no light upon Billy's defection. "Playin' hookey, maybe," said Tad. "It's such a nice day," and he sighed. After school Nancy had a mothers' meeting and there was no time to drive to the Conroys' to investigate.

The children gossiped darkly all next morning. At the noon recess Nancy was relishingly told the news by Lena Benson.

"Billy Conroy's done somepin' awful and got sent to the County Farm, Miss Nancy. They say his mother took on somepin' turrible!" Lena's vocabulary was not ample. "I don't know'm," in response to Nancy's quick question. "Drunk and 'salting a constable—somepin' like that."

Assaulting a constable! Yes, Billy would. But "drunk?" She didn't believe it. Something Bob had once said to her flashed through her mind. "At cotton-picking time he sentences all the husky, able-bodied darkies his spies can catch—" Billy was white, but he could pick cotton, and he was poor and ignorant, therefore fair game. Nancy heard classes all afternoon in a daze—too busy thinking, however, to permit herself the luxury of anger.

When the children had gone she locked up hastily. As she stepped outside on the path a small object whizzed through the air and fell accurately in front of her. It was something wrapped in dirty paper and tied with twine. Nancy glanced at the woods from which it came

but saw nothing. She untied the string and a stone dropped. On the paper was written in pencil in Billy's rickety hand:

"Miss Nancy come to the big sweet gum back of the well. don't let nobody see you. BILLY."

There was no one in sight. She walked slowly to the well and again looked all around, then stepped through a broken hedge of wild blackberries, into the woods. Billy was leaning against the sweet-gum tree, very white and exhausted looking.

"Will you — git — me — some water — Miss Nancy?" he said. He was panting and spoke in faint gasps. She brought him a dipperful and he gulped it thankfully, then slid to a sitting posture, his head against the tree, breathing heavily, with his eyes closed.

"Got any lunch left?" he asked, opening them suddenly. She hastily produced an apple and a cold roll and he devoured them in four or five bites. Then he grinned at her, impishly.

"I run all the way from the county farm here," he said. "Been comin', off and on, since daybreak. Guess it ain't no sin to be hungry."

Nancy was appalled. "They'll be following you, Billy," she said. "Oh! I'm afraid for you."

"No," he answered. "They 'bout figured I'd git over by the ferry, and I fooled 'em. I swum the river a good two mile further up. Feel," and he thrust one cuff gleefully into her hand, "still wet! I got pretty near dry in the woods, though." He

stopped and listened a moment. "You don't hear dogs, do you?" Nancy listened, too, and shook her head; then she realized what he meant.

"Billy—not bloodhounds?"

"Sure. Whole pack of 'em." She shuddered. "Swimmin' the river'll throw 'em off, I think," he soothed her. "All I want you to do, Miss Nancy," he went on, "is to go do some visitin' or somepin' and come back by here after dark and take me in town with you—if you ain't skeered to, Miss Nancy, and if you'll be so kind." His voice and his eyes, under his tangled mop of hair, were pleading. Nancy was racked with uncertainties. He must have sensed it, for he said fiercely:

"I'll hang myself to this sweet-gum 'fore I'll go back. I'd *ruther* do it than be beat to death with them 'leathers' and maybe tore and chewed to pieces by them hounds. I ain't done nothin', anyway, to be sent over there," he continued, hotly. "Did you hear 'bout it?" She shook her head. He leaned forward. "Well! Night 'fore last I went to the store to buy some cough surp for Mom, and that Lige Meeks that works for Mr. Protheroe was there in his buggy and he says, 'Drive you fur's the woods road, Billy?' and I says, 'Much obleeged, Lige' and got in. And when we come to the road he says, 'Aw, come on up to my place and I'll git my lantern and take you all the way home.' Says 'I got to git some aigs for my old woman, anyhow, from Mist' Stovall, right beyont you.' So I says, 'Fine! Suits me!' And we goes on up to his house,

'bout a quarter above here, just off the road a ways.

"Well, when we got there he drives on in, 'stead o' hitchin' and never answered me when I ast him why. They 'uz a whole gang in there. Henry Protheroe and two fellows he runs with from town, and Richard" (Mr. Protheroe's youngest son who attended Nancy's school) "and some more of our boys and that low-down old Jake Buford. No sign o' Mrs. Meeks. They 'uz all playin' cards and had little blue and red things piled up around and dollars and bills in the middle of the table and the whole place smellin' like a saloon used to." (The state was dry.)

"Lige took a drink or two and says, 'We'll go after a while.' Then he gives me some in a glass and I never had tasted whiskey—'course I'd drunk heaps o' cider and sich," he added hastily, lest he be thought a tenderfoot, "so I took a big swallow and golly!—I spit and sputtered all over the place. It like to burnt me up! They all whooped and laughed fit to kill and then Lige takes a notion to be smart and comes up, kind o' silly, with a bottle half full, and rams it into my mouth and says, 'I'll teach you how—seein' as you don't know good whiskey when you meet it.' And that made me hot. I slammed the bottle out of his hand and it fell on the floor and broke, and then Lige hit me one side o' the head, and I slapped his face for him—hard," Billy said it savagely. "First thing I know he claps his hand on my shoulder and says,

'You are under arrest for assaulting an officer of the law,' and clicks a pair o' handcuffs on me. Everything got quiet and nobody says a word. Then Henry took Lige and me in his Ford, round at the side, down to Mr. Protheroe. First word Mr. Protheroe said I knew he knew all about it and it was a put-up job. Wasn't so much what he said, Miss Nancy, as the way he said it. You could tell." Billy grinned sardonically. It was a strange new expression for his wistful young face to wear.

"So I shut up," he proceeded, "and never said a word, not a word. Just looked at 'em. Mr. Protheroe give me ninety days at hard labor on three counts, and I thinks to myself, '*Any time* I stay ninety days workin' for an old devil like you'! The nigger dep'ty come in and got me. It took me 'n him four hours to git over to the Farm. It ain't so fur as I thought, by the road." He counted up. "I was there from twelve night 'fore last, till four this mawnin!" He stopped, exhausted, and was silent a while, leaning against the tree trunk.

"Miss Nancy" he began again, agitatedly, and a look of reminiscent horror spread over his face, "you don't know what that place *is*. My God!" he said, under his breath, "I'll die 'fore I go back."

Nancy gripped his quivering hand. "Billy, look at me! I've got no more idea of asking you to go back to that place to stay than I have of going to heaven. I was only trying to think out the best and quickest way to handle this thing. I don't

think your way is the best. I believe I know a better one." She stood up. "Will you trust me absolutely to get you out of this my way, and do just as I say?" She looked him squarely in the eyes. "Will you?"

"Yes'm," he said, looking as straight into hers.

"Then come inside the schoolhouse—it's a little safer than here—and stay until I come for you. It may be a long time, but we'll have to risk it. I don't think you'll be found, but if they *should* get you before I come back, I'll follow you right over there. I promise."

When she had tremblingly pulled down all the shades and locked the door on him, she whipped her little mare into a sharp trot all the way to the crossroads store and made for the telephone. Bob, when by a great stroke of luck she got him and explained matters, sounded unruffled, but he had knit his brow for a quick and scowling moment. "That's easy enough to handle," he said, matter-of-factly. "I'll go find Tom Dixon," (the County Judge) "and make him give me——"

"A pardon?" interrupted Nancy. "Great! That's just what I thought could be done."

"No," he said, "there's too much red tape about even a little old county pardon. Simply a demand for immediate transfer to the Juvenile Court—which is himself—under authority of the new law, you know. That'll fix it. I'll bring it on out and pick you and the kid up."

"But would Protheroe honor it, Bob?" anxiously.

"He'd have to or be cited for contempt. The Juvenile Court is given original, exclusive jurisdiction over children under seventeen, and Billy is. Don't you remember we looked it up that Sunday?"

"Yes," said Nancy, "but I'm afraid——"

"That's a very bad thing to be, my dear," his habitually level, teasing voice came back to her. "I'd be something else if I were you." He added: "Hang up now, like a good little girl, and let me get busy."

Half smiling, half irritated, anxious, rather apprehensive, but, on the whole, deeply relieved, Nancy stood—wondering how best to kill an hour or so. She dared not go back to the schoolhouse with Billy. Someone would notice her "buggy" and hunt for her. There were two roads out from town and Bob might take either so she was afraid to try to meet him further in. Her friend, the old storekeeper, was slumbering unsociably in his chair. Nancy felt, all at once, utterly worn out and limp. She tied Bessie in a shadier spot, dragged her buggy cushion to a little glade off the road and sat down, propping herself against one of the enormous pine trunks. There was a lazy quiet in the woods and a sunburnt, spicy aroma, very soothing. Sounds were far away and faint—fainter

She sat up with a jerk, aware that she was straining every nerve to hear—hear what? Something she'd been hearing in her sleep for some time.

There! Dogs yelping. Oh! dear God! She

leaped to her feet in an agony of terror and rushed to the road. It was later. The shadows were much longer. There was nothing to be seen either way. Again the dreadful, significant sounds. But weren't they a little fainter—farther off? Perhaps she might get to Billy first! Wildly, shaken with dread, she snatched at the check rein and turned her mare about. Then she heard Bob's siren far down the road and a shuddering relief went through her. She had retied Bessie, commended her to the storekeeper's care and was in the car at Bob's side before he came to a full stop. They shot up the pike in a cloud of dust.

The schoolhouse was lonely and green-shaded, as Nancy had left it. She stooped to unlock the door and on the ground at one side of the steps saw glass smashed. The window above it had nothing left but the frame. Her heart gave a furious thud. They pushed into a room that was entirely empty. Nancy was very white. She was twisting her hands together. "And he trusted me, he trusted me!" Bob heard her saying. He put one arm around her and drew her outside.

"Nance, I'm going to leave you at the store and go after them, now," he said. "I'll bring the boy back with me, you may be entirely sure." Anyone, looking at his face, would have been.

Nancy got her small official self well in hand at last. She spoke urgently but coolly. "I want to go with you, please, Bob. It's my business to see that place, and this is one chance in a thousand.

I want to use this case of Billy's for all it's worth and I can't unless I get things first hand and make a second eye-witness to back you up. You must let me come, Bob. You've got the papers? Then surely there's no danger in going on a perfectly legitimate errand?"

"Oh, no," gruffly, as he put her into the car, and climbed in, himself, "but it's a nasty sort of business for a girl to be in on, Nance, and I——"

That settled it—and Nancy—very firmly in her seat, though what she said was only, "I'll go crazy with worry if you leave me alone at that store, Bob. It'll be much worse than going along. I'm going. Please!" and they went. Amazed negroes opened gates in the Protheroe fields at a sharp word from Bob. One of them yielded up the information that the "boss was crost d' river at d' stockade."

"Fine," said Bob to Nancy. "Right where I want him."

She was trying miserably not to think of Billy and what might be happening to him. The road was ankle deep with dust. They were powdered with it soon. Bob drove steadily, but fast. By way of variety the road sometimes humped along for a space, in old cotton rows, never smoothed, and the pace had to be slowed a little. Gates were frequent and they, also, made a maddening delay. Nancy felt that her raw nerves were flicked every time the car had to stop.

It had been 5:35 when they left the pike. It was a few minutes after eight when they came out

of the fields suddenly and saw before them the shadowy sweep of the river, reflecting the dark, starry sky. There was no moon. Just ahead a black bulk with twinkling lights showed—the ferry landing and the ferryman's house. Grumblingly he helped to run the car on to the wagon ferry, took his place, and they started over, drifting funereally across the starlit blackness—in blackness. Nancy held Bob's arm tightly, and leaned her cold cheek against his reassuring shoulder. He did not move, merely puffed away slowly at the cigarette he had lit. And so they sat, silent, listening to the croaking of the frogs in the river marshes, all the way over.

At 8:30 they saw the camp, unmistakably,—tents, outbuildings, and a dark bulk in the center that must be the stockade. They approached. Bob flashed his pocket light. A Ford car was just inside the double gates, to the right and left of which a high fence of barbed wire stretched away. A man stood up, inside, suddenly. He had been sitting on the running board of the Ford. By the light of the "flash" Nancy recognized Henry Protheroe and spoke to him.

"I'll go get my father," he offered.

"No," said Bob. "We'll come on in and see him, thank you," and the startled Henry somehow found himself opening the gate.

They passed him, staring blankly. As if blundering about at the wrong doors Bob flashed his light into a window at the big square stockade, built of

logs chinked with clay. It was empty and he pushed Nancy in front of him to look—filthy bunk above bunk in open sections, piled with tow sacks or colored rags of quilts, straw oozing from the mattresses; one dim oil lamp hanging from the ceiling; four windows, dirt-smeared, and heavily barred—a kennel for beasts.

Nancy's mind photographed it. There was no one in sight, not even Henry now. They could hear voices and sounds, however.

They stole over to the largest outhouse, also built of logs, Nancy's heart beating suffocatingly, and peered cautiously into a window. The place was crowded with people—negroes and whites mingled—huddled on benches, some on top of long tables. Evidently a mess house. Three smoking coal oil lamps illumined the scene. What faces! Bob muttered something under his breath. Great, heavy-jowled negroes, brutal-faced or merely vacant and imbecile; an emaciated old white man with a dreary, foolish look, staring at the ceiling; two or three sullen young white fellows, one almost a boy; near him a big, red-faced brute with a revolver on his hip—these seemed to stand out of the mass of one hundred and twenty-five or more people by some accident of grouping. Nancy stared in fascinated horror.

Bob drew her back, presently, and they went to another window from which they saw a platform, with another lamp, Protheroe on it speaking, two more men with pistols—guards, of course—sitting

back of him in chairs. They could not hear his words, but from the sneering sullenness on the faces of the white men they gathered that he was lecturing them for their sins. With startling suddenness a door opposite their window opened and another guard burst in, dragging—Nancy's control broke. "Oh! Bob"—she clutched his hand, sobbing desperately under her breath. "Oh! Bob, stop them! Go get him!"

"Wait," he said, holding her close to him with one arm. He was watching keenly.

The guard half shoved, half dragged Billy, white-faced and scared but gamely battling, on to the platform, where he was stood up, as an object lesson—obviously—for Mr. Protheroe's further brief remarks. Henry came in in the midst of them and tried to attract his father's attention, but the latter shook his head at him and went on. He evidently gave the guard some order then, for Billy's face became convulsed and in his violent struggles he all but broke away. Nancy hid her face.

"We're in time, dear," Bob soothed. "Don't you see we are? They haven't touched him yet. There's nothing to be afraid of, little Nancy." He had not looked away from Protheroe, to whom Henry was whispering now. He suddenly drew back, took Nancy to the car quickly and put her in, then drove it in front of the mess house and sounded his horn.

Protheroe appeared on the instant, shutting

the door behind him. Bob introduced himself, briefly.

"I know you," said Protheroe. "What do you want?" He ignored Nancy.

Bob, in silence, handed him the Court order and a copy of his commission as volunteer Probation Officer of the County Juvenile Court, with power to serve papers, make arrests, and so forth. He kept the "flash" steady as Protheroe read them all through.

Nancy, scarcely breathing, watched the two as they stood in the queer ring of light.

"I'll have the boy turned over to the County Judge in the morning," said Protheroe at last, non-committally, turning to go.

"No," said Bob, measuredly, moving closer to him. "I'll take him now."

They did exactly that. And a dead-tired, hero-worshipping Billy sank to sleep in Mrs. Singleton's guest room at 1:30 the next morning.

CHAPTER VI

A PIPE IS SMOKED AND A CHOICE MADE

"DEMOCRACY would be a good thing," observed Nancy scornfully, "if it existed."

She was in her living room, reading election returns in the Carrollton *Daily Post* and the fervent, unladylike "damn" she had emitted some time since at sight of the headlines: "Jim Protheroe nominated County Judge by large majority" had precipitated into satire. She read on, absorbedly, puckering her brow and twisting sideways to hold the paper under a lamp on the reading-table.

Bob Singleton, with his favorite pipe, smoking lazily in a big chair opposite, his long legs stretched, studied her with a half smile. He was trying to think of the name of that stuff Nancy's dress was made of—crêpe-de—crêpe-de-something. It was a wonderful, queer blue, not like blues you were always seeing, and it draped graciously as it fell. In the girdle was twisted some Chinese embroidery—blue and black and silky, with gold threads through it. The chair she was in didn't swear at her gown either, he noticed. It was upholstered in some dim old patterned stuff. From his shadow, with half-closed eyes, Bob gazed and dreamed,

indifferent, for the moment, to elections and Judges—good or bad.

In the soft yellowish diffusion of light from the lamp—Chinese too, Nancy had a passion for things Eastern—the little lady sat, her delicate face in profile, her hair startlingly black against the white of her throat, made whiter by the intense blue of her gown, which seemed to glow deeply, with a light of its own. Under her feet the lamplight fell briefly on the softly fused mulberries and blues and blacks of a Persian rug. Behind, in the shadows, were dim gray encompassing walls, above an ivory, panelled wainscot, and here and there the gleam of brass wall sconces holding slim wax candles. Nancy and her Cousin Lætitia clung to candles.

Dark in the corner was a low piano and above it Nancy's Hokusai print of Fujiyama, before which she all but burned incense; in fact, there was a flat bowl of flowers placed worshipfully under it now. Across the room, over a most seductive little "pie-crust" tea table—too well-bred to boast of its beautiful old silver—hung another print, worn and lovely, mounted on dull gold. Nancy would cheerfully sell the refrigerator and the cook stove to buy a new Japanese print, and Miss Lætitia, with other tastes, was scarcely more practical. These failings were the basis for Mammy Line's stock characterization of them as "Po' folks wid rich folks' ways."

Bob's roving gaze stopped, all at once, because Nancy's friends suddenly cried out to him with various and familiar voices from the twilight of the

open bookshelves stretching all the way across the back of the room. He knew them all, the whole great and motley company. No need to go nearer. Benvenuto Cellini jostling Twain's Joan of Arc—saint and sinner paired for once; François Villon with his impudent knave's face thrust up among the quiet countenances of Wordsworth and Horace and Emerson; Huck Finn, a grin among the aristocrats, Thackeray and Meredith and Hardy. There was Alice, in another Wonderland peopled by the world's Mad Hatter, Don Quixote, the knights and queens of the Morte d' Arthur, old Yea-and-Nay irascible Carlyle, for Caterpillar, and, for eccentric inhabitants, the madmen, the misfits, the doubters and cynics: Maupassant and Schopenhauer—Wilde and O. Henry and Heine—Omar and Anatole France.

All to themselves were that joyous company, the minstrels and tellers of tales,—Homer, Stevenson, and Bret Harte there, Conrad in the shadows next. Ungrudgingly they gave shelf-room to some sober folk, Tolstoi and Hugo; and two youngsters separated only by centuries—Aucassin and Clayhanger. Over them all the master of the shelves—Shakespeare—presided, and scattered everywhere through were his disciples, English, French, Norwegian, German, American.

Nancy was saying something. Bob started, and his wandering spirit came back to his drowsy long self in the big chair.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I said," Nancy repeated, nodding her head to emphasize and tapping the newspaper, "this kind of thing makes one realize that civilization is a very nice—*word*."

"You sound like a book of familiar quotations to-night," he derided.

"I feel like a bomb."

Bob glanced at her sharply. She was in earnest. He decided to wake up.

Nancy leaned forward. "Consider the ballot, as a symbol, Bob. Shut your eyes and see the serfs of England in tattered mobs flourishing scythes outside castle gates, see the Place de la Concorde running red with feudal blood; see a dark straggling column of political prisoners lashed through icy Siberian wastes. And then open them on that disgusting exhibition yesterday of American democracy at the polls. The good citizens all at home or somewhere else, shrugging their shoulders and saying 'What's the use? Foregone conclusion that Protheroe fellow'll be elected,' and the paid riff-raff turning out in joyful job lots, and the ignorant rural vote cleverly inflamed against the town in favor of a 'county man,' who 'understands the farmer,' and even the labor men going wrong—shoals of 'em—just because Tom Dixon, who's not a shining light but who is at least decent, was once attorney for the street-car company. Now, I ask you, as one American to another, how do *you* feel?"

"I feel," said Bob slowly, "like the prisoner at the bar—I and my kind."

"Oh! come off! That's not fair," she responded, instantly. "I didn't mean that, either. You did *your* darnedest."

Bob had risen in his wrath, in a Rotary Club meeting, forgetting entirely his customary reticence, and told the tale of Billy and the convict camp, whereupon a number of gay gentlemen, impressed, had hied them straightway to the polls. He had also gotten hold of Victor Craig, the leader of the city and state labor forces, and found him, just back from a trip to the East, making a belated attempt to bring the Railway Shopmen into line against Protheroe, but with small success. "Stampeded," Craig told him. "No use."

Bob shook his head at Nancy now. "No," he answered her, "I never did think much of eleventh-hour conversions. Mine was no exception. It'll take more than spurts of civic virtue or a few guilty consciences to handle this thing. I don't know just what it will take," meditatively. "I can't seem to work up much optimism, somehow, about any one cure-all like Socialism or the women's vote, much as I'd like to. It would be so nice to be able to believe, as the platform sisters seem to, that when they have the vote there'll be heaven next day. Lord knows they could have mine on that basis and I'd go wash dishes for 'em, gladly."

"You only get *passées* 'platform sisters' down here," defended Nancy, "aside from the state suffragists, who work more than they talk. But you know, Bob," she confessed, "I'm not nearly

as excited over suffrage as I was. At college I used to be as bad as your 'platform sisters,' I think. But I unpacked a lot of suffrage literature the other day and found myself sending it all up to the attic. I was just suddenly bored with this 'the vote our glorious end' business. What do you suppose is the matter with me? Reaction, because we were so fed up on it at college, or what?"

"Don't you think a sudden contact with reality generally chills theories into vapor?"

She thought that over a minute.

"Yes," she admitted. "When you begin to think in terms of women instead of in terms of ideas, it makes a difference."

Then Nancy sat musing for a time.

"You know, Bob," she began again, confidentially, clasping her hands over one crossed silken knee in her favorite pose and leaning forward to look earnestly into his face, "I get worried about my mind, sometimes. One time I'm all glowing with enthusiasm and confidence, about equal suffrage, for instance, as the great eventual solution for human ills—and the next thing I know all the glow has faded out and I'm quite chilly and full of doubts and questions. I seem to think, not as you do, always, in cool reasoned argument, but in flashes of feeling. Unless an idea is sort of suffused with faith and emotion for me, it—it simply isn't *my* idea, any more. And I change overnight. Is that shallowness?"

"No," he answered. "It's growth. Likewise that peculiar feminine affair—intuition."

"I don't know—" she was doubtful. "I have very little respect for my mind, anyway. Yours is much nicer. In fact, you're quite nice in general." She looked at him approvingly, with entire seriousness.

Her eyes, which, when she laughed, brimmed with light like sunny blue sea-water or, when she thrilled to some idea, shot blue fire, were deep blue pools, now, between a silken black sedge, wide and reflective—child's eyes, gazing at him with a child's adorable unconsciousness.

Poor Bob, by a heroic effort, kept his arms where they belonged and settled himself more firmly into his chair. But as a conversationalist he was done for, the rest of the evening. He was off into dreams again, studying Nancy from his secure shadow and saving himself by monosyllables, while she talked lightly on, gesturing vividly, as was her habit, and poising a whimsical or thoughtful moment or two on every topic—a clever letter from Peg Lawton full of "collegiana"; Billy, his embarrassed pleasure at being the star boarder in the Singleton home, his worship of Bob, and, with a ripple of laughter, his remark to her: "Golly! if he knows everything in them books he's got all around his walls, don't see why his head don't crack!"

She went earnestly into plans for the prosecution of Billy's case when the Grand Jury convened; plans for his family who were to be brought into

town as soon as funds permitted, and put under Bob's care. She wound up her school triumphantly, opened her office with a defiant flourish under "Judge" Protheroe's nose, and reviewed a whole new novel, while Bob lounged, his eyes on her face, hearing about one word out of every sixty or so.

Bob was always watching people. When he was not devouring books on surgery at rash hours, reading Shakespeare, hiking through the woods with some "kid" or other, or staving ahead in a profession in which his will to achieve was not so much an ambition as an intention, he was amusedly, or keenly, studying people. He found them infinitely interesting. He had amazed Nancy once, when she asked him why he buried himself in a little town after Johns Hopkins, by telling her that he did it because it was so "broadening," and he added, "Best post-graduate course in the world, if you keep up by getting back to a center now and then, and if you don't stay too long, of course. You see, there's at least one of every kind of medical and surgical case in a small town." In the same way he was sure that there was at least one of every kind of known person in Carrollton.

There was only one Nancy, however, anywhere, he was quite certain. He decided, watching her, that there could not conceivably be another human being whose spirit, before one's very eyes, so swiftly and exquisitely informed and molded its bodily covering to shadow forth its every

slightest, subtlest phase. Her whole slim delicate self vibrated to her changing moods like music—yes, and flame and wind-rippled water, and all moving, evanescent things. He had seen Nancy, too, in the grip of reaction—when her spirit drooped its wings—white, toneless, all but lifeless. She was just a little silken, palpitating fascicle of nerves.

What an actress she would make, he thought, with that responsive, inspired little body and that glowing soul of hers. Several people had tried to make an actress out of Nancy, but she would have none of it. "Too unreal," she had told them all. "I want to live life, not imitate it."

He was suddenly conscious of a tension in the air—a pause—and he said at random, hastily, "Yes, indeed."

It was evidently the wrong answer, for Nancy cried reproachfully: "You weren't even listening to me, and I was being quite entertaining. What were you thinking about?"

Bob's heart misbehaved for a moment as he sat up abruptly. Suppose he were to tell her a few of the things he'd been thinking. Perhaps he'd bungled it the other day. Perhaps—What would happen? A remark of little Miss Lætitia's flashed in his brain all at once, like a warning signal: "One cannot *tell* Nancy anything. She must find out things for herself. She has been that way always." And she had related a little tale, to illustrate, of one time when she had said to Nancy,

aged two and a half, staring fascinated at a lighted candle, "No, No! Baby mustn't touch. It would hurt, oh! so bad!" and Nancy had promptly seized the candle flame to *see* if it would hurt! "She's been doing it ever since," Miss Lætitia mourned.

Bob, with an inward sigh, chose the long road—the road of wisdom—and hope. He looked quizzically into the inquiring blue eyes of the willful small person in question.

"That," he answered her, smiling, "comes under the head of *my* business. Little girls mustn't ask personal questions, you know." And he rose to go.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIGHT IS ON

ON October first the Chickasaw County Court House practically declared a holiday and general walk-out. The conscientious County Clerk, who always slaved straight through New Year's and Washington's Birthday was "out" to all comers, but might have been found in a rear room adorning a step-ladder and vigorously whacking at a cob-webbed ceiling with a cloth-covered feather duster—cheered on by an interested audience below and supervised by the thorough-going Nancy. Sleeves rolled up, begirt with a blue-checked apron, she was efficiently bossing the job of cleaning the new office of the Chickasaw County Public Welfare Association, just after it had been cleaned by the janitor—toothless old black Mose. Most of her noteworthy assistants she had known ever since she began to know anything. It was a courtly and highly respectable masculine "County ring," on the whole, into which she had so unprecedentedly and daringly stepped. At least it would be until November first, when the new, alien officers came in.

"Hey, Clem!" said her old friend, the Chancery

Judge, suddenly, to the perspiring leading man on the ladder. "When you get tired I'll come on for second shift."

Everybody shouted. He weighed fully two hundred and forty pounds and, it was well known, never did anything he could make a terrified, obsequious "nigger" do for him. He was an irascible old aristocrat and darkies shook in their shoes when he thundered orders at them, though they grinned, admiringly, whenever his name was mentioned.

Nancy's newly selected clerical assistant, whom she had known and liked for years, walked in upon the scene, shortly, and stared about her with the quizzical, shrewd smile that was habitual. She was Mrs. Molly Burns, the best public stenographer in town—and a half-dozen overworked law-firms were busy bemoaning her venture into social service.

"What is this—a party?" she inquired.

"This," explained Nancy, "is—or are, I *never* know which—our opening exercises. A pleasant and athletic time is being had by all, as you will note. Take off your hat and scrub that radiator for me, will you?"

"Hold on, Miss Nancy," protested Tom Dixon, the County Judge, with a laugh. "Let's feed her first. I never went to a party, anyway, where they didn't serve refreshments. If you'll do the ordering, I'll set up the crowd."

Nancy obligingly folded a dust cloth over one

arm, waiter fashion, and took orders. Work suffered for a space after the arrival of the drug store "boy" staggering under a tray of iced drinks.

"Don't you-all tell people about this," she warned her guests, presently. "The town thinks we're crazy, anyway. And I know some sainted sisters, as a friend of mine would call 'em, who'd be horror-struck at this frivolity. They'd think we ought to open the office with prayer instead of lemonade." She paused. "I guess we ought, at that," she added, slowly. "November first is coming."

"November first be blamed!" growled Judge Martin, the Chancellor. "We're going to settle that rooster and get you your appropriation. Just you pitch in, and uplift to your heart's content—you and Miss Molly—and leave Jim to us."

Nancy smiled pleasantly, inwardly deciding to do nothing of the kind. Busy men had, in all honesty, made her promises before.

Some half hour later she closed the door upon the last of her visitors, observing: "And they say women talk too much!"

"However," responded Mrs. Burns, "we have a clean ceiling. Keep that in mind."

"Yes," Nancy rejoined, rather grimly, "a clean ceiling and nothing under it except a few chairs and an excellent prospect of bidding the said ceiling good-by one month hence. Come here, Mrs. Molly, sit down and let's go into executive session about this business. It's no joke, you know.

We've both got to earn our livings as well as 'uplift.'"

They sat down and she continued seriously: "There is in our treasury, at the present time, exactly nothing; and it'll take a cool six thousand dollars to run us our first year. Half of that amount is to be squeezed from a skeptical, partly amused, partly hostile public by lukewarm adherents, the other half from a County Judge who hates everything we stand for and whom we're going to try our hardest to put out of business. That's the situation, brutally put.

"Of course you've got odd stenographic jobs to fall back on until the Association's financed and you can return to it if the thing collapses—which it won't," she added quickly. "Now, I haven't any resources of that kind, but——"

"I'm through with public stenography," stated Mrs. Burns deliberately. "I'm not going to 'fall' one inch in its direction. I'm sick of taking dictation from assorted men who have no more brains than I have, but who are all running their time and businesses to suit themselves and enjoying life. I'm going to do something that suits *myself*, for a change."

"You certainly must have a fondness for forlorn hopes and lost causes, then," commented Nancy. "I warned you what this job was like when I first talked to you, if you remember, but I'm warning you again, right now, before you sever your connections, and as a matter of fairness, be-

cause I know you're a widow, with a child to rear, and not much surplus capital." She broke off abruptly and asked:

"If you're tired of the work you've been doing, why don't you get married again?"

Nancy was always asking the most horrifyingly personal questions, but nobody ever seemed to mind.

Her companion smiled. "Didn't I just tell you I was sick of taking men's dictation?" she inquired pointedly. Nancy chuckled. "And," Mrs. Burns went on quietly, "you might just as well quit wasting useful breath on me, Nancy, because right here's where I intend to stay until they put us both out. I like the whole idea of this job, and I like the fighting end of it best of all, after my years of stagnation. I also like you."

They were sitting across a bare table from each other, above a bare floor, surrounded by shabby bare walls against which a lot of lonesome looking chairs were ranged.

Nancy reached across the table and gripped Mrs. Burns's hand. "You're the salt of the earth, Molly Burns," she said, a trifle shakily. "I can't scare you, can I? Stay by me, then, and we'll show 'em a thing or two about the Scotch and Irish, won't we? Who's afraid?"

They stayed until violet shadows seeped into the room from the river, looping townwards back of the Court House, but they were too absorbed, clicking away on a typewriter they had borrowed,

drawing up prospectuses and budget estimates and such-like statistical stuff for the mass meeting four days thence, to heed the misty pastel outside their windows.

At five Clem Newton came back for Nancy. She was "wanted" at his telephone.

"That's my new teacher just out of school," she explained, rising resignedly. "She's calling to blow the top of my head off, probably. I told her to report here at five."

But she came back, radiant. "Wonders will never cease. She *likes* it! Said Alice Madden cried all day for me—the precious baby—but otherwise she's had no trouble with the children at all, and seems to have made a ten-strike with Protheroe! Of course I covered my tracks and he doesn't know I put her there. She says she offered to give his two oldest daughters music lessons free of charge and he positively beamed upon her and told her at once how vastly superior she was to me as a teacher! Can you beat that? That's what I'd call a clever woman." She was chuckling delightedly.

Mrs. Burns laughed. "You don't seem heart-broken, exactly, over his disparagement of you."

"Certainly not! Shows he has more sense than I gave him credit for. She *is* 'vastly superior' to me. Oh! you know, Molly, I'm perfectly charmed about that!" She pirouetted gleefully and sank into her chair with a swirl of white skirts. "Now, let's do some more estimates."

There was a knock on the glass door. Nancy opened it. A shabby, tired-looking little man about thirty-five with a dry, humorous smile on his thin face, stood outside.

"My name's Craig," he remarked. "You don't know me, but I know you, Miss Carroll, through our mutual friend, Bob Singleton. How are you, Mrs. Burns? I heard you-all were givin' a party and I came over to see if there were any refreshments left."

Nancy welcomed him in cordially, but her brain was registering shock and amazement. This insignificant working-man the far-famed V. A. Craig, President of the State Labor Federation and dictator of the policies of Governors and State Central Committees and United States Senators? "One of the keenest minds in this state," Bob had said of him.

"You go in for elegant simplicity, don't you?" Craig observed, glancing about.

Nancy began to like him. Mrs. Burns was watching him closely.

"How much will it take to run you?" was his next unexpected question. Nancy told him in detail. He stared absently out of the window as if bored.

"Hum," he said thoughtfully, when she finished. "Seven weeks."

Nancy looked puzzled. "Until the Magistrate's Court meets," interpolated Mrs. Burns, in an aside.

"Had your hearing of the kid's case yet before

Dixon?" he asked. Nancy shook her head. "Gotten your appointment as County Probation Officer?"

"No," she responded. "I've been awfully busy winding up my school and then, too, I really didn't see what good Dixon's appointment would do. I mean that Protheroe's the one to appoint or not appoint, isn't he, when everything is settled?"

He regarded her sadly, shaking his head. "What did they teach you at your college. anyway?" he inquired. Nancy gasped, then smiled, uncertainly. "Ever hear that little phrase about 'possession bein' nine points of the law'?" And she said "Oh!" in a reflective tone.

"Know anything about newspapers?" he queried, in a moment.

"Very little, I'm afraid."

"Useful things—newspapers."

Nancy, with a gleam in her eye, reached for a pencil and pad. On it she wrote: "Arrange re publicity—series of articles."

"Yes?" she said, sitting forward in her chair. "Go right on; don't let me stop you."

"Jim Protheroe, Miss Carroll," Craig continued. seriously, knitting his black brows over keen, shining gray eyes, "has two endearin' traits you may not have discovered yet. Number 1: He knows when he's licked. Number 2: He wants to go to the Legislature."

This was news.

"You mean"—Nancy was eager—"that he'd

do a good deal to avoid a scandal because he's anxious to gain popularity?"

"Scandal?"

"Yes, a Grand Jury investigation of his County Farm."

"Oh! nothin' to that," said Craig, indifferently, shrugging. "The Grand Jury'll find things in fine shape, you know. All Grand Juries do."

Nancy looked unhappy. "Those poor wretches out there—they haunt me. If that's true what can we *do*, Mr. Craig?"

"That's for you and your Association to tell me," he rejoined, rising, suddenly, to leave. "Don't drink up all the refreshments next time," he added, smiling, at the door.

Nancy stopped him. "Oh, wait! You think, then, that proper newspaper publicity and the mass meeting will fix things for us?"

"Mass meetin'?" he considered. "What's a mass meetin'? Herd of supers called to ratify what three people around a table have decided."

"Then, what?" Nancy was persistent. "Bob says you know everything."

"Bob has several fool notions." His eyes twinkled significantly past her into the likewise twinkling eyes of Mrs. Burns. He continued, in reply to her question, "What you people need, I'd say, is one o' those great, spontaneous popular uprisin's of public sentiment, led by a few bank presidents and mill owners, you know. Your mass meetin' *might* start it, at that. Try it. Good-

bye." The door shut behind him, but in a moment he thrust his head in again.

"I wouldn't worry so much if I were you, Miss Secretary," he remarked, smiling. "The Lord's bound to be on your side or He wouldn't have given you a face like that!" And he closed the door.

Nancy wheeled around toward Mrs. Burns with kindling eyes. "If I had the money," she declared, "I'd pay that man by the month to furnish me with brains. And isn't he oddly delightful with his funny irrelevancies?" She was thinking of his parting broadside.

"They aren't irrelevancies," Mrs. Burns replied. "They're very much to the point."

"Don't see it," Nancy murmured, abstractedly, busy with notes.

Mrs. Burns came up behind her and slipped an affectionate arm around her shoulders. "I know you don't," she said. "That's the dear funny little thing about you, Nancy girl, that I think I love most."

Estimates and self well in hand, the Secretary of the Chickasaw County Public Welfare Association sat, with Mrs. Burns, four days later in the parlors of the Y. M. C. A. building waiting dignifiedly for the mass to arrive at the meeting. It had been announced in all churches, written up lavishly in the newspapers, and some hundred people had promised her supporters by telephone to be there. Nancy considered that some excellent press-agenting, of which even V. A. Craig would approve, had been done.

"Shall we start?" Mrs. Montague tiptoed over to whisper.

Nancy was thunderstruck. "Before people *come?*" she asked. There were only about eighteen or nineteen present.

Mrs. Montague shrugged. "Well," she yielded, "we might wait a little while longer, I suppose."

The good lady tiptoed back to her place to engage in a subdued whispered conversation with the woman next to her.

"She needn't be so solemn about it," Nancy thought, in some exasperation. "She acts as if she were in church."

Nancy studied the people in the chairs from the corner of one eye—all Social "Servants," as she had dubbed them, except for the Y. M. C. A. Secretary; the President of the Association, a Mr. Joyce; one other white-haired citizen of prominence and, on the front row, the new Methodist minister, the Rev. Mr. Richard Payne, who had been in town only a month.

Nancy was a Methodist by descent, as she was a Democrat, and she and the church had been joined when she was ten. It had made little impression upon either the church or herself. She wondered if this minister would try as hard to save her soul as the one had four years ago before she went to college and broke away from him.

He didn't look like that one. He looked like a real, live man, she decided. He was lounging, somewhat, hands in his pockets, his long legs

crossed, head resting easily against the back of his chair. His face was that of an outdoor man, tanned and ruddy, rather lank, like his spare frame, laconic—that was the word she wanted—given distinction by a broad, thoughtful forehead and a heavy mass of gray hair. She puzzled over his expression. There was humor in it, certainly. But why that faintly satiric twist? Oh! Perhaps he was overhearing something from the rear that amused him. He glanced her way, suddenly, caught her staring and smiled at her with grave kindness. Nancy, unembarrassed, smiled back in a rush of warm liking, completely intuitive and certain.

There was a little stir at the double doors. The crowd arriving? Two lone women and the Jewish Rabbi appeared, followed by the County Health Officer—no others. She flipped her wrist-watch into view. Good heavens! It was 4:15. And the meeting had been called for 3:30. Apparently this was the meeting. Mrs. Montague nodded at Nancy, whispered to Mr. Joyce, and he came forward and called the "Association" to order. Simultaneously, loud thumps, distant yells, and blasts of a whistle announced that the High School basketball team was ready for business up above. Nancy groaned, in an aside to Mrs. Burns.

Some minutes later, launched on her "address" and spreading her plans out before them in the most practical words at her command, she was conscious that she was fighting as fiercely—almost

despairingly—as she had ever fought in her whole life. The noise above was maddening; the polite, amiable unconcern before her was like a cold weight that must be pressed back—like a heavy, cold current washing against her as she swam gaspingly upstream, teeth clenched.

Nancy thought of people, always, as minds hotly at work giving off vibrations that either clashed or blended with one's own, or that clashed sometimes, blended other times. It was probably a moss-covered theory, developed by dozens,—most of the things one triumphantly discovered for one's self were. All the vibrations of the people before her at that moment were hostile—no, not hostile, pleasantly apathetic, which was worse. She suddenly "saw red!"

"You comfortable, sheltered people!" she cried to them daringly, urgently. "Have you the least idea of the raw misery that is lying at your front gates? Have you the slightest conception of what we're organizing to fight? I'm going to tell you a few things." And she did.

When she finished two women were staring at her with unchecked tears dropping slowly down their cheeks and the Rev. Mr. Payne was on his feet.

"In the name of the Lord," he said, his mouth a straight grim line, "let's quit talking, and *do* something."

"Amen," said the President.

And they got down to rock bottom in the shape of a plan.

CHAPTER VIII

WHITEWASH

"AND do you solemnly swear," said the Circuit Judge, "to perform the duties of your office to the best of your ability, with due and constant regard for the public welfare, and to support and maintain the Constitution of the United States, and the Constitution and laws of this State, God being your helper?"

"I do," responded Jim Protheroe, right hand raised, left hand upon a Bible.

"That will be all," remarked the Judge, curtly, shaking hands. He turned to the next candidate to be "sworn in" to a county office.

The court room was almost empty of spectators. It was the soberest ceremony in years.

When it was all over and the door had closed behind the newly made officials, the Judge looked at his clerk and laughed shortly.

"You know, Sid," he said. "A long time ago I used to believe in a merciful Providence that was right on the job, with one eye on sinners and one on saints, punishing the bad, rewarding the good—all that kind of business. But if a fellow like Jim Protheroe can stand right up here and swear before

God to do things he knows, and I know, and God knows, he's got no more notion of doing than a rabbit, and get by with it, as he undoubtedly will—why, what becomes of your Providence theory?"

Downstairs, in the County Judge's office, Protheroe was shaking hands with a delegation of business men. There was a pleased smile upon his habitually expressionless countenance. These were some of the leading citizens of the town—a wealthy, jovial cotton planter for chairman, two presidents of banks through which the town's great cotton trade poured a golden stream yearly, the manager of the largest lumber mill in the largest of the Southern mill systems, the president of the School Board, and so on—twelve in all.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" Protheroe inquired cordially.

"Nothing for us, your Honor," said the smiling Chairman, "but a good deal for the town of Carrollton, which we are making so bold as to represent this morning. Here's a petition signed by six hundred and forty-two people." He laid it before Protheroe. "Most of them are well known to you, and they request that you reappoint Miss Nancy Carroll, the present Probation Officer and Secretary of the new County Welfare Association. They also want you to ask the Magistrate's Court, when it convenes, for an appropriation of three thousand dollars to assist in financing this needed new organization. Most of us, Judge," he added, "have been serving as volunteer highwaymen the

past week, holding up the town. We've netted some twenty-seven hundred dollars so far and have a long list of call-backs, besides a chance at the City Council. So Carrollton's doing its part, and we think it's up to the County now."

Protheroe's face had gradually tightened. "Three thousand is a lot of money," he began combatively. "The County's finances are not in very good shape, as you gentlemen know."

"Still," said one of the delegation quickly, "you must remember, Judge, that this organization will take over the County's pauper list. Really, Judge, six thousand is not enough. It's a ridiculous amount, when you think of it, for a County with the wealth of this one. Carrollton ought to give more, of course, but we can't get it—at the start—for a new thing like this. We'll net our three thousand or more, but it wouldn't be fair to ask the town for the whole amount. This is a County business. It ought to be a great help to you as Judge," he finished.

Two of the men coughed suddenly.

"On the contrary," responded Protheroe gruffly. "Miss Carroll and some of her backers have taken a very antagonistic and unfair attitude toward me in my administration of the County Convict Camp. I hope they *will* succeed in getting the Grand Jury to investigate." He faced them directly. "I'd like the town to know the real facts in the case. I can't help feeling, gentlemen," he continued, shaking his head, "that her selection

as secretary has been a great mistake. Some level-headed man, now, instead of an excitable, hysterical woman—" He paused. "*I don't know whether I've got any moral right to trust the County's funds in hands that I don't feel are safe and sane. You see my position, gentlemen. It's a hard one.*"

Mr. Joyce, the President of the Association, stepped forward. "I think, your Honor," he said, dryly, "you can count upon the Board of the Association, of which most of us are members, to restrain Miss Carroll's dangerous, youthful tendencies. The Board is, after all, the controlling power, you know. I am sure we can promise you that full justice will be done all factions by this Association. No one, who is honest, need oppose or fear its investigations and work." He spoke with a deliberate emphasis. "I believe that satisfies your point?" He looked keenly at Protheroe, who found it convenient to study the top of his desk.

"I'll take the matter under advisement, gentlemen," he said, shortly; and the delegation departed, the chairman observing cheerfully that he would call by in a day or two for an answer.

In the Welfare Association's office, a few minutes later, he and Mr. Joyce were chuckling over their interview, with Nancy and Mrs. Burns.

"I think he'll come around," commented the planter. "That dose of hot lead Joyce poured into him will make him think a long time before he turns us down. But just the same, Miss Nancy, if you've got any reserves, I'd bring 'em up. He's

a tricky devil. I'm going to make him put things in writing."

"I've got reserves by the dozen," declared Nancy, the light of battle in her eye. "A lot of clever women are going after him next." The "great spontaneous, popular uprisin'" was proceeding admirably.

"Bully for you," laughed Mr. Joyce, and the two men left.

Three days later a modest news item announced the reappointment, by Judge Protheroe, of the Secretary of the Chickasaw County Public Welfare Association, Miss Nancy Carroll, as Probation Officer of the County Juvenile Court, and dwelt upon his pledge to support the Association's request for a three thousand dollar appropriation from the County Magistrate's Court.

And three weeks later Nancy, Bob Singleton, and Billy Conroy had finished their testimony before a special investigating committee of the Grand Jury. A few days previous the Magistrate's Court had appropriated the funds requested by the Welfare Association's Board and a rather surly, reluctant Protheroe.

"Seems kind of mean, somehow," remarked Nancy to Bob, "to use him and then prosecute him the next breath. But this is war. What do you s'pose'll happen now, Bob?"

"A whitewash," he responded.

"By the Grand Jury?" aghast.

"No, by Protheroe."

And "whitewash" was precisely what the investigators found—literal whitewash, spread liberally over the outsides and insides of stockade, mess-house, and outbuildings, and figurative whitewash, permeating the atmosphere. There were clean straw mattresses in the bunks and clean cotton blankets upon them. The negroes filed in to lunch after the white men had filed out. Obliging and good-humored guards showed the visitors about the flourishing farm. The prisoners had little to say, and that little was to the effect that the treatment was "fair enough." There were no evidences of brutality. There was no sign of the old white man, of whom Billy had told the Grand Jury, in horror-struck tones, "they say that pore ole fellow's been there nigh onto seven years. Say he didn't do nothin' wrong in the fust place an' he's too crazy and off his head-like to know enough to git out o' there. Say he oughter be in the 'sylum but he makes split bottom cotton baskets for 'em an' cooks an' everything; and they keep him there an' work him till he drops. He has fits every now an' then, too."

Close and repeated questioning of Protheroe, guards, and prisoners brought the same response. The old white man had been sent to his "people" in another county. No, he hadn't been a prisoner; just an old, foot-loose fellow who worked for his board. The very young white man whom Nancy had seen, and who—she had told the Grand Jury—was a "mere boy," perhaps under eighteen, had

also "gone." Finished serving his term, the guards explained.

It was a thoroughly exasperated and baffled committee that drove dustily back to town.

"Damn it all," said one of them, in a sort of angry admiration, "you'll have to hand it to that fellow, Protheroe. Efficiency plus—that's what he is. A person's got to get up mighty early in the mawning to get ahead of *him*."

"Little Miss Nancy Carroll must be an early riser, then," remarked the Committee chairman, with a chuckle. "She certainly got her Association financed in the neatest way I ever witnessed. It was a treat—good as a vaudeville act—to see old man Jim up there in that Magistrate's Court requesting the money to help pay his own funeral expenses!"

"Aw! They won't be able to do anything to him," protested one man, grumpily.

"I'm not so sure," the Chairman replied. "My money's on Miss Nancy." And he chuckled again.

Dejection reigned in the Welfare Association's office following the publication of the Grand Jury's findings.

"And to think," exclaimed Nancy, "that that kind of thing is happening right now all over this State under this rotten convict lease system! Maybe not quite so bad in other places as it is out there at Protheroe's, but pretty nearly."

She was pacing up and down the office, restlessly,

hands clasped at the back of her head—thinking. In a moment she said:

"Molly Burns, take your typewriter in hand and write a letter to Spencer Ames" (he was the Secretary of the National Conference for Public Welfare) "enclosing a clipping of the Grand Jury's findings and a copy of my report on the Convict Camp, and tell him to send us all the literature and copies of laws and everything else he's got bearing on this subject and telling how other States are handling it. See?"

Mrs. Burns opened a box of new letterheads and sat down before a shiny new machine.

"So we're not through with his Honor?" she asked.

"'Through'? We're starting!"

Nancy sat in pensive silence for a time, looking fixedly out of the window at a distant silvery screen of cottonwood trees across the wide river. There was a smoky blue haze in the still autumn air. It was very peaceful and beautiful out there. Why was Nature so serene and humanity so turbulent and twisted, she wondered? It was too much for her. She got up and strolled about.

Presently she asked:

"When you hate and despise to do a thing why the best thing to do is to *do* it, isn't it?"

Mrs. Burns glanced up from her page and laughed. "There spoke a daughter of Erin."

Nancy stood, for another moment, irresolute, then she marched out of the office, banging the

door behind her, proceeded steadily down the corridor and stopped short before a glass door which said, in gold letters, "County Judge."

She raised one small hand to knock, lost her nerve and dropped it, raised it again instantly and knocked, holding her breath.

"Come in," said Protheroe's voice.

Nancy entered and he nodded. He did not rise from his desk chair or speak. She stood with her back to the door, looking at him. They were alone.

"Have a seat," he said at last, harshly. Nancy moved forward slowly until she stood against his flat table desk, just across from him, but she did not sit down.

"Mr. Protheroe," she began seriously, "*you* think I'm a meddlesome, ill-balanced fool of a reformer, and I think you—don't know how to run a convict farm. We'll probably continue to think those things till the end of time. Moreover, I want to tell you that I mean to do everything in my power as Secretary of this Association to improve the condition of the prisoners on your farm with or without your consent!

"And I'm going to fight the whole system that is responsible with every ounce of ability I've got. I may not get very far with it, but I'm going as far as I can. So much for that!"

His face was like granite.

"Now, you're to be County and Juvenile Court Judge here for the next year's term and probably

afterwards, if you stand for reflection, and I'm to be your Probation Officer. We've got this court to put in running order; we've got to be associated in case after case that I shall bring before you. There are plenty of 'em here, too. I've learned enough already to be sure of that.

"All those things being true, Mr. Protheroe, it strikes me that we ought to get together and make some sort of working agreement—a truce in hostilities, or something of the kind. I thought I'd come in and see what *you* think about that."

Protheroe seemed rather taken aback by her directness. He said nothing for the moment.

Nancy smiled. "It may surprise you to learn that I have a very great admiration for your brains and ability and energy, Mr. Protheroe. I know how you started—a backwoods orphan boy on four acres of land, with nothing but ambition—and I take off my hat to success under difficulties whenever I see it. I just think you're misapplying those same brains. I'm even audacious enough to imagine I may convince you you're wrong, some day." (That was not strictly true, but there was no use damning a man in advance.)

"Don't you think we might manage to get along here," she finished, "without wanting to cut each other's throats on sight?"

Protheroe smiled at that—a rather grim but not unhumorous smile.

"Yes," he answered. "I think we might."

"Fine!" said Nancy, smiling more broadly

still. "That's a bargain!" And they actually shook hands over it!

She went slowly back down the corridor to her office, still smiling.

"People are queer, contradictory contraptions," she muttered to herself. "You hate 'em one minute and you've got to like 'em the next—and then hate 'em some more, probably. Meanness and decency all jumbled up together. Queer," her smile died; "pitiful," she added. "It's really not his fault," she said to herself. "Life did it to him."

She opened her office door. Inside, talking to Mrs. Burns, sat a "client"—an old woman in a shawl. In a far corner were two others—a blind man and a little girl.

The adventure was on.

CHAPTER IX

A MATTER OF DIAGNOSIS

"THERE's an urgent 'phone call for you—a rural number," Mrs. Burns told Nancy, as she came in to work one morning, about a week later.

Nancy called, and to her amazement Billy Conroy's voice answered, quick and agitated. "Miss Nancy? This is Billy. I'm out at the store. Mom's sick. She's awful sick. My sister 'phoned me at Doctor Bob's an' I come on out an' it's so. She's jest a-layin' there, burnin' up, an' every now an' then she goes on wild. Yes'm. An' other times she's kinder half-dead lookin' an' don't know nothin'." He was frightened.

"Yes'm," in answer to her question, "I did try to get him, but he's at the horspital, operatin', an' the nurse said I'd have to call later. An' Miss Nancy, Mom's *beggin'* for you"—there were tears in his voice. "Every onct in a while she does. An' she says for God's sake come—right away—she may die any minute—an' *will* you, Miss Nancy?" He was sobbing. "Mr. Higgins is right here in his buggy an' he says he'll come on in and git you."

"You and Mr. Higgins stay there a few min-

utes," Nancy said quickly, "and let me see first if I can't get Dr. Singleton and come out with him."

After much difficulty she got Bob at the hospital and told him of Billy's message. He was plainly in a hurry and spoke rapidly:

"I won't be able to get away from here before noon, or later." And, at Nancy's exclamation of disappointment he added, rather sharply, "Can't be helped. Call another doctor if you get out there and find her in really bad shape. I'd have a look at her first, though. The kid may be unduly alarmed. Excuse me, Nancy, I'll have to——"

"Give me some first-aid directions, then," said Nancy, somewhat coldly, nettled by his tone of dismissal.

"Oh! take her temperature, of course, and if it's up, an ice pack and cold sponges—but she'll be all right until I can get out," impatiently. Then he added, with emphasis: "Make her lie quiet, however, and *don't* move her—you hear? Telephone at noon if you want me." He had rung off.

Nancy, knowing just how unreasonable she was to be annoyed with Bob, was nevertheless annoyed, also worried. She telephoned Mr. Higgins to come for her, secured an ice-bag, thermometer, and a few other supplies and sent the janitor for a cake of ice. Then she sat, nervously waiting.

"Oh! I feel like a wretch," she told Mrs. Burns distressfully. "I've let myself get wound up with all this work in town and neglected those Conroys.

I'm awfully frightened about her, Molly. Billy's a truthful youngster, and not a bit inclined to exaggerate. Bob ought to have known that as well as I," resentfully. "He *might* have been a little more concerned. These doctors are all alike."

Mrs. Burns smothered a smile, and sympathized. But Nancy continued to reproach herself.

"Alice Madden, too," she said, in a fresh access of self-mortification. "I told her mother I would put her with a family in town, here, and let her go to high-school. She's too rare and lovely a thing to waste on those woods. And here the time's going and I haven't done a thing for her. Not a thing!"

Mrs. Burns did not share fully Nancy's alarm over Billy's distress signal. She had a small boy, herself, and she knew them to be prone to sensationalism.

"Let's do some back records while you're waiting," she suggested diplomatically. "That will calm your mind."

Nancy hated records. She agreed, however, but she dictated abstractedly, with frequent errors, and jumped up, in relief, when little Mr. Higgins appeared in the doorway, cap in hand.

"Have you seen Mrs. Conroy?" she asked him anxiously as she settled herself and her supplies in his buggy.

"No'm. Me'n my wife didn't even know she was took till Billy come over to my place after me this mawnin' and ast me to drive in fer you. I

hain't seen her yit, but m' wife was goin' on over. They live s' fur away fum anybody, you see, and their house—or whatever you'd call that there little ole shack them pore weak critters live in—is s' hard to git to."

Nancy was racked by fresh pangs at this simple comment. How could she have been so criminally, so blindly, neglectful?

They made fairly good time on the pike, Mr. Higgins cheerfully retailing neighborhood news as they jogged briskly along. He was not built upon high-strung, emotional lines, like his passenger; moreover, sickness, trouble, and death were old stories in the backwoods.

After about an hour they struck into the deep rutted logging road that led past a thicket a hundred yards or so before the Conroy's shack.

"Do you think an automobile ambulance could get through here, Mr. Higgins?" Nancy inquired.

"One o' them big fellows? I don't know'm. It 'ud be pretty rough goin'."

"But don't you suppose it could make it?" she insisted.

"Yes'm, I guess so. Oh! Yes'm, it could make it, all right," he added, more positively, beginning to warm to the idea and glancing upward and to each side of the road. "The trees grow pretty high through here, there ain't so many low branches to ketch, and it's wide enough, if they don't pass a team. Ain't much haulin' goin' on right now, though."

They said nothing for a time. Mr. Higgins's mind was wrestling with the new and startling project—a pleasantly stimulating one, on the whole. In a moment he rose to the surface with a reluctant objection his conscience obliged him to make.

"How 'ud you git to the ambulance fum the house, through all that bresh?"

"Stretcher." Nancy was brief.

"Oh!"

They jogged on silently. After some fifteen minutes he remarked:

"Strikes me that 'ud be a pretty good idear. They say that City Horspital turns out right smart o' cures, and Lena's been ailin'" (Lena was Mrs. Conroy) "off and on fer five years, I reckon."

Nancy made no reply. She was thinking. "Don't move her," Bob had said. Yes, but suppose she were much sicker than he, without any warrant at all, seemed to think she was? Suppose she were as sick as Billy had said? It was undoubtedly malarial fever; she'd had chills for years. What was it Bob's blood test had shown?—"Positive. *Æstivo-autumnal* parasite," the most malignant type. Of course moving her would run her fever up and be a bad thing, but they could go slowly; there was the ice pack, and the enormous relief of getting her out of this hole into expert hands. Mr. Higgins could take the children in. She knew an old lady who'd—Oh! well, she'd wait and see. They were almost there, now.

Before the thicket Mr. Higgins tied his horse,

and, carrying the ice, walked ahead of Nancy along a narrow path through the midst of it, holding the thorny bushes aside—now and then—for her to pass. Billy met them outside the door in the sunshine, his face streaked with dirt and tear stains.

“Is m’ wife here?” Mr. Higgins inquired.

Billy shook his head silently. His little curly-haired sister who had shyly followed him out, volunteered the information that “she had to do home and dive de baby his bottle but she ’uz tomin’ back some more dis evenin’.”

Nancy, inside the shack in a moment, was bending over a very sick woman. There was no doubt of it. She was lying upon a tumbled dirty bed, sunk in stupor, her gaunt, swarthy face drawn, hollow, and burning hot to the touch.

Janie, Billy’s oldest sister, a thin, pallid child, kneeling opposite and fanning her mother frantically, stared into Nancy’s face with frightened eyes.

All about the rough, squalid shanty were the desperate little evidences of Janie’s attempt to be an efficient housekeeper and nurse. The floor was quite clean. On a palette of tow sacks and quilts in a corner lay a sleeping baby and a tiny girl—even younger than the one outside—the child’s arm across the baby’s body and a strip of mosquito netting stretched carefully over both. The table was littered with left-over food and soiled dishes. A folded, rough dried sheet lay over the bed’s footboard.

The child watched with agonized intentness as Nancy took her mother's temperature, starting as she read the thermometer— $104\frac{3}{5}$. Good Lord! Nancy was almost as frightened as Janie. This was the first very ill person she had ever seen. She called Billy quickly and he drew water from the well, icy and clear; then she hurriedly began to bathe the sick woman's face and body, putting the ice-bag on her head. Mr. Higgins fidgeted nervously outside the door.

"How long has she been this way?" she asked Janie.

"Off an' on last night an' to-day. She's been draggin' aroun' sick an' had fever 'bout a week, though." The child began to cry, brokenly. "Is she goin' ter die, Miss Nancy? You jumped when you looked at that glass thing. What is it? What does it show? Is she dyin' *now*?"

"Oh, no, no, sweetheart!" Nancy gathered herself together. "She has a rather high fever, that's all. This cold water will lower it. Do you think, Janie, you can come around here and bathe her just as I'm doing while Mr. Higgins drives me to the store to telephone?"

Janie assented eagerly, somewhat comforted.

Nancy and Mr. Higgins left, promptly, and they reached the crossroads store in record time. She unhesitatingly telephoned for one of the town's two ambulances, belonging to an undertaker's establishment, giving elaborate directions. Then she made the needed arrangements with the head

nurse at the hospital, calmly leaving word for Doctor Singleton to remain until she got there. She was rather glad he was in the operating-room and couldn't speak to her. Not because she was in the least doubtful as to the wisdom of her course. Certainly not, with the poor creature as ill as all that! But Bob would be stubborn and require argument and think she was "unduly alarmed," too, probably.

There was much to do when Nancy returned to the little cabin—packing of clothes, boarding up of windows by Billy and clearing away of overhanging bushes to make the path wider. The two babies were awakened and dressed, crying loudly. They immediately went to sleep again.

It was a relief to Nancy to be doing anything that would dull the fear knocking steadily in her brain and crying to her: "If you had done what you should, this wouldn't have happened. It wouldn't!"

The sick woman moaned a little now and tremors twitched her from head to foot. Flickers of pain passed across her still face. The thermometer registered a slight fall.

Pretty soon there was nothing to do but keep on with the cold sponging—and wait.

The minutes dragged. The unconscious face on the pillow before Nancy was deathly and twisting with some mysterious and unknowable agony. She could hear the thumping of her own frightened heart. Would they never come? The terrible

stillness of the environing woods beat upon her ears as though it had been a roar of surf. She kept rigidly calm and forced herself to smile when Billy and Janie turned their scared young eyes to her for hope.

At last they came—the ambulance driver and an attendant, with Mr. Higgins.

“Easy now,” said the excited little man, as they slid the sick woman cautiously upon a stretcher and threw blankets over her, while Janie sobbed, terrified, at Nancy’s shoulder. Her mother opened her eyes and muttered feebly as they proceeded slowly down the path. The children were stowed in the buggy and bundles thrust under the seat, Mr. Higgins seized the note Nancy had written to the old lady who was to shelter them, and they drove off, followed at a snail’s pace by the ambulance, with Billy and Nancy on the front seat, next to the driver, and the attendant within, with their patient.

“It’s awful rough,” commented Billy presently, in some anxiety. The ruts were deep and crooked and the heavy car lurched and jolted in spite of its slow gait.

Pretty soon they made a turn and met a logging team.

“Darn the luck!” muttered the driver, and with considerable difficulty he engineered the car out of its ruts, ran one wheel up the sloping side of the road over a growth of tree roots, passed the team, and coming carefully down again, slipped heavily into a dry hole and shook the car from stern to stern.

"Oh!" cried Nancy, shudderingly, nerves on edge; and the driver swore under his breath. Nancy liked him for it. He was taking his job so seriously and painstakingly, where he might have been case-hardened and callous.

The three on the front seat drew a long, simultaneous breath of relief when they turned at right angles into the pike. Nancy glanced at her wrist-watch—a quarter of twelve. But Bob would wait for them. Everything was all . . .

"What's that you say?" asked the driver, sharply, at her side. His ear was pressed to the speaking-tube that came from within. "Yep, I got you," he said, in an instant.

His face had set and tightened, suddenly. In what seemed a single motion he leaned over, gripped his wheel more firmly and stepped, with increasing pressure, upon the accelerator. The huge car jumped, then fairly hurtled forward.

"What is it?" Nancy's heart was leaping madly. She held Billy's hand tight.

The driver answered soothingly, his eyes straight ahead: "Oh! I guess we just shook her up a little too much. She's been conscious in there, Henley said, but she fainted again just now. He thought we'd better speed up while we can make good time and get on in."

It was a censored account. What Henley had really said was: "Step on the gas, Mike. She's slumped. Beat it!"

Billy was trembling violently and he clung to

Nancy's hand. She was very white. Neither was deceived by the driver's manner. Nancy put one arm defensively around Billy and they sat so, all three in a sort of straining silence until the ambulance, avoiding the crowded streets, at last drew up at the side entrance of the hospital. Nancy, leaning forward, saw Bob's car parked with several others. Evidently the doctors who were operating hadn't left.

"Wait on these steps till I come with news, Billy," she directed, and she sprang down and ran up the steps into the head nurses' office as the attendant and an interne, who had come out, brought in the stretcher.

"Can they take this emergency case right up?" she asked. "And will you get Dr. Singleton there at once?" She explained rapidly; the nurse reached for a house telephone.

Bob and two other doctors, still in their white clothes, were standing near the elevator shaft when the elevator, with the two men bearing their unconscious burden, a nurse, and Nancy stopped at the fifth floor.

Bob's face was stern as he shot a glance at the still, pallid countenance of the woman on the stretcher.

"In here," he ordered, curtly, motioning toward a room. To Nancy he paid no attention. She and the nurse followed him and one of the doctors into the room. The ambulance attendant slipped away.

Bob and the other doctor bent over the long,

motionless form on the bed, lifting an eyelid, taking pulse, temperature, respiration. Nancy observed intently—cold with apprehension. Were they going to look up in a second and say that there was nothing they could do? She did look so ghastly pale and so horribly—dead.

"How long since she became unconscious?" Bob glanced up to ask.

"'Unconscious'?" She was alive, then. Nancy told him eagerly, and he asked other questions in quick succession—exact symptoms, supposed length of illness, what had been done for her. In his curt impersonality there was no vestige of the devoted, indulgent comrade. He was all physician.

In a moment Bob despatched the nurse on an errand and bent over his patient again to make an abdominal examination. The two doctors exchanged rapid and low-toned comments. Something about "eight day" and "coma," she heard them say, and then there was a word that startled Nancy bolt upright: "Typhoid."

"Oh! Bob!" she cried to him, aghast, forgetting the other doctor. "Are you *sure* it's typhoid? I thought it was malaria!"

"It most certainly is," grimly, "and internal hæmorrhage to boot, from that shaking-up she got. I *told* you not to move her, Nancy, on the off chance it was typhoid. What in the name of heaven made you—" He stopped, his eyes on her face, and crossed over to her, putting a kind hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right, dear," he said gently. "You didn't know. Don't you worry. We can pull her through, I think. We'll try a blood transfusion."

A nurse and interne entered with a high, wheeled cot.

"You just clear on out, now," he was smiling, "and the nurse'll come tell you how things go, Nance."

He took her to the door, and she stumbled, blind with tears, down a corridor and sank upon a window-seat at the end of it. She heard them go by with Mrs. Conroy.

Her mind had not registered one word that Bob had spoken to her, through the storm of self-reproach raging through it.

"Stubborn, self-opinionated, ignorant little fool," it was saying to her, furiously. "This is your doing. If that woman dies and those children lose a mother it will be you—you who did it—because you think you know so much more than anyone else in the world. Fool! Blind, little fool!"

She could not bear to face Billy's miserable, questioning eyes. She would leave him downstairs until she heard from Bob. Bob! How good he was and kind. Perhaps he would save Mrs. Conroy. He did such marvelous things, people said. Bob had said something encouraging, hadn't he, in there in the room? Perhaps—perhaps!

She sat, dully waiting, for a long time, her back to the window, drooping exhaustedly. Two nurses,

out of view, were chattering cheerfully, somewhere on the floor nearby, like a couple of noisy, pert sparrows. How could they laugh and chatter like that with a woman trembling between life and death in the operating-room?

Nancy got up and walked back and forth—restless, miserable.

Somewhere a door opened and instantly she was tense and straining.

There were voices, the sound of moving feet. She stood still, one hand on the wall. At the head of her corridor two nurses and an interne passed, wheeling the cot with Mrs. Conroy's long form upon it, her face turned in the opposite direction. The nurse who had been in the room with them, earlier, came down Nancy's corridor, smiling rather strangely, Nancy thought.

"She's going to be all right," she said. "And Dr. Singleton is resting nicely. Splendid of him, wasn't it?" Her voice and eyes glowed. "I must run back to my patient, now." And she turned away.

Nancy leaned back against the wall—suddenly. What had the nurse said? What did she *mean*? Her mind groped darkly. "Dr. Singleton is resting— Resting?" The thing he had said in the room—what *was* it? In a flash of light her brain cleared. She heard Bob's steady voice saying to her: "We'll try a blood transfusion."

Things got a little black around Nancy, as she stood leaning against the supporting wall. Slowly,

with care, she edged her way to the window-seat and sat down heavily, her face in her shaking hands. She did not cry. She was whispering one thing over and over: "Oh! dear and wonderful and good." And then, "*so* tired. And so brave. And I can't even thank him. He would just be gruff and embarrassed and growl at me. Bob, Bob!"

And after a time she got unsteadily to her feet and went down to find Billy.

CHAPTER X

THE "PARSON" TAKES A HAND

"WHAT is so rare as a day in December?" Nancy paraphrased to herself, on one of those days, as she swung lithely, joyously along in her frosty, morning walk to her office.

December, at least a Southern December, had been given a poor deal by poets and weather-men, she decided. Swinging ahead on this particular Monday she was thinking of Peg Lawton and the thing Peg used to be always asking her, with her wistfully concerned little smile: "Are you happy, Nancy?" And Nancy could never be induced to say that she was happy. "I'm interested," she would say. "That's just as good, isn't it?" And when pressed for a reason, "Too many unanswered questions in the air for anyone to be happy. Happiness is a reasoned state."

But there were no questions in this sun-drenched, glittering, roistering air that swept every musty corner of one clean and bare. One stepped out of the front door into the icy flood of it with a breathless little shock, and one's spirit soared sunwards on the strong beat of wings. Life was good, youth

was better, and work was best of all—so, Miss Nancy Carroll!

Why were people always condoling with her about her work—her adventurous stimulating work—she wondered? Condolences ranged all the way from "such an unsuitable occupation for a young girl, my dear," the remark of some prim old-maid cousins, to Bob's "darned hard and nerve-wracking day labor, I call it, for a delicate little something like you!"

Only he wasn't saying it so often lately, somehow. He was getting so interested in her "charity patients" himself as she fired at him daily the cases that were flooding her office. For Billy he was doing wonders. He had put him into the Trade School at the Railway Shops, was teaching him at night, practising football with him and Bob's younger brother, Hammill, in the Singleton's back-yard, and learning wood lore from him on Sunday morning hikes by way of compensation. And Bob was the Conroys' household god—a patron saint bearing health in his little black bag and red apples in his pockets. Brusque and abrupt to his "nervous," flutteringly alarmed "lady" patients, whom he occasionally doused with a brutal ice bath of common sense, he was gentleness itself to all the little sick "charity" babies.

"Old peach!" thought Nancy, warmly.

A vignette trembled before her eyes, all of a sudden. It was of Bob, in a corner of her cramped office, waiting for her to dispose of three persistent

people so as to go out on a call with him, and a tiny, rumpled-haired, red-cheeked thing in rompers, sex unapparent, approaching him waveringly, with strategic caution and deadly gravity—objective, one large dangling gold watch. Only when cuddled up on Bob's knee, watch against a blissful ear, did the attacking party vouchsafe a fat, contented smile.

Bob was not the only person who was getting interested in Nancy's "clients." The Rev. Mr. Richard Payne was another—a very important other. Nancy had to do mental acrobatics every time she tried to reconcile his ministerial self with his every-day self, as increasingly well known by her. Ministerial he certainly was. He had been, in his younger days, a circuit rider in the northern mountains of the state, had journeyed over storm-beset rocky passes and slept in lonely outpost cabins, with the bitter wind howling round about and snow drifting through the chinks in the logs all night long. His was a religion militant to which hardship, poverty, and martyrdom were routine. Even now, when he could have it, he stubbornly—contemptuously—avoided any softness of life. And his gospel was hard—hard as gray iron—a Puritanic heirloom perfectly preserved.

But his humor was sun-and-time-mellowed wine—Horatian wine. And the mild irony with which he punctured the aspirations of "dead beats" of both genders who counted all ministers legitimate and easy game, roused Nancy's pro-

fessional admiration. He had, too, a laconic—(her favorite word for him)—efficiency in action and a straight, outspoken wrath that reaped a harvest of critics. And yet he was a most genial person.

He himself seemed to have none of Nancy's difficulties in harmonizing what she was pleased to term his Puritan and his Pagan aspects. *His* happiness apparently was a "reasoned state," incredibly emanating direct from that rock-bound faith of his. She shook a perplexed head and gave him up, as at the moment of so doing she came in sight of the Court House.

"Wonder what'll be waiting for me this mornin'?" she thought. Yesterday it had been the Chief of Police—his hand on the collar of a most woe-begone little skinny object with a mop of rusty black hair through which shining, furtive eyes peered supiciously.

"Got him out of a side show at that street carnival goin' on," the Chief explained briefly, with a grin. "They had him all dolled up in dresses, snake charmin', in a cage with a lot o' king snakes. Harmless, you know. Sign up sayin', 'West Virginia Snake Girl'! I deprived 'em of the attraction, as you see, and brought it to you." He laughed. "I let 'em keep the snakes, though."

Protheroe, who was making a fairly good juvenile court judge, had been amused at the tale and quite decent about helping her start investigations and plan for the child.

The day before that it had been a pitiful young white-faced crippled woman. Nancy had all but wept with her at the desolate story of orphaned wretchedness and gallant, unavailing effort to find employment, and had felt like a stony-hearted wretch to refuse her a permit to sell pencils on street corners, under the professional begging code she and the Mayor had drawn up.

And three hours later in the Mayor's office, the girl, with two husky men confederates, all arrested for begging, had cursed a horrified Nancy, the Mayor and the town in general, with the fluency of long practice, demanding her freedom and the immediate return of the four hundred dollars in cash and the two diamond rings removed from her pockets, when searched, and locked up as evidence in the jail safe!

Stories—stories—every one of them—pouring in. (Carrollton was a railway junction and the largest town for several counties around, and the Association was new and, unfortunately, well advertised). There was, for example, that hardy perennial, the South-bound hobo, from God knows what spot originally, for he had a different birth-place and set of circumstances for every charity office on his circuit; there was the lady who had invented a patent porch swing and wanted "just a little capital to launch the project nationally, you know"; there was the hopeful migratory backwoods family, laden with babies, lunch boxes, and disreputable baggage, whose chief ambition in life

seemed to be to get somewhere other than the place it was in—to Tennessee if it was in Missouri, or to Texas if it was in Tennessee. There were, already, the lame, halt, and blind, palsied old and helpless young; a shrinking gentlewoman and a voluble, stranded vaudeville actress of not in the least doubtful morals; a runaway boy or two; some pretty little shopgirls, downtown flirting with destruction; an ex-convict; a rich black sheep; crooks, street-women, Knights of the Road.

"Birth, death, and life—tragedy, farce, and romance," Nancy had commented meditatively to Mrs. Burns, one day, weighing a pile of records in her hand. "Oh! for an O. Henry or a Maupassant to wander in and write them up!"

Coming to her office door and the end of this long morning soliloquy of hers simultaneously, she thought again "Well, what shall I find to-day?" and she turned the knob with a little anticipatory mustering of herself into action.

Against the screens she and Mrs. Burns had put across the office to form a makeshift ante-room sat two people—an old, feeble man with a hopeless, vacant face, staring fixedly at her, and a young fellow who looked ill and sullen. The brown screens faded, before Nancy's startled eyes, into a murky background of huddled, brutish figures on benches—a smoky oil lamp sputtering overhead.

"Oh!" she cried, impulsively, to the younger man, "haven't you been on the convict farm?" And then she bit her lip. He nodded dully. The

old fellow was staring obliviously at the ceiling now.

"Come inside here," Nancy directed his young companion. She noticed that he winced as he got up to follow her.

Mrs. Burns came into the office. "Molly," Nancy said, in a quick undertone, "get Mr. Payne here, if you can, and ask V. A. Craig to stop by at noon."

Reading a note on her desk from the school-teacher at Red Hill, asking for an interview on Saturday morning about "something of importance," Nancy, over the top of it, studied the man before her, slumped in a chair. Great weakness, obviously, he had—the spiritless, passive look of one exhausted by long illness; but there was still the sullenness that she had remembered, with its suggestion of sneering superiority to abuse and abuser. He was older than she had thought him, and there was refinement in his face—character, too.

"How old are you," she asked, "and what is your name, if you don't mind telling me?"

"Nineteen," he answered. "Joseph Brannon."

Mrs. Burns, at the telephone, with her back to them, was taking notes.

"Did someone send you here?"

"No," he replied. "I heard about your Association and came to bring the old fellow. I'm not after charity, myself."

"We don't like charity much, either," said

Nancy pleasantly. "We're a lot more interested in justice."

He looked up, sharply, at that and laughed sarcastically. "You won't find it around these parts," he remarked. "Better emigrate."

His voice and speech were those of education and good breeding.

"I'm just off your county farm," he added, harshly, "so I have what you might call inside information on that subject."

Nancy leaned forward. "One of the purposes of this Association," she quoted slowly, "is to improve the condition of inmates or ex-inmates of the city and county jails and convict camp. Now, if we can't help you, as you seem to think, perhaps you can help us, by advice as to how we can best go about doing that. We'd appreciate it."

"How did you know, right off, I'd been at the Farm?" he asked, suspiciously: It had just occurred to him.

"I saw you there once," admitted Nancy, with reluctance. She was playing her cards badly.

A light broke over his puzzled face and the sullenness and inertia vanished. "Oh!" he exclaimed, with his first smile, "you must be the plucky school-teacher that got that kid out. No other woman's been there. Are you?"

She nodded.

"Bully for you!" he grinned boyishly. "The story went around—leaked from Henry Protheroe." He stopped, at that, and his look altered

queerly, as, for a moment, he studied her deliberately, as if in appraisal, his eyes narrowed and penetrating. "The smutty little cuss," he muttered, then, disgustedly, half under his breath and to himself, rather than to her. It was fourteen months before Nancy found out what he meant.

"Why didn't you say something?" he went on, smiling and boyish again. "Were you afraid to give me a lead for fear I'd do sob-stuff all over the place? Or did you figure you could trip me up better if I didn't know you'd ever been out there yourself?"

"Something like that," responded Nancy non-committally, smiling at his shrewdness. "I wanted you to do all the talking anyway."

He sat forward in his chair, again with that wince of pain, and his face hardened. "Don't worry. I'll *talk*," he said, grimly.

And he did—for an hour and ten minutes. Mr. Payne came in and sat listening. Mrs. Burns forgot to take notes. They locked the office door and posted an "out" notice.

It was the old tale of the self-willed boy and petticoat rule—a seething adolescence—quarrels—a slammed door and a box car to "San Antone." Then disillusion—drifting—but not degradation—yet—for riding the "trucks" by night, there were always wood piles and offices to sweep by day for meals never yet begged outright.

Finally, tramping through Chickasaw County with a "pal" of the road—"nice fellow, too—"

came the arrest of both by one of Protheroe's constables, on a charge of stealing a coat from a negro.

"Did you?" asked Nancy, her question an unconscious tribute.

"No. We—borrowed his coffee-pot," smiling, "when we found the door open, but we left it on a nail in his woodshed where we stopped to clean up a little."

Protheroe's sentence had been six months for vagrancy and petit larceny. Brannon had been held three months in addition, without any court proceeding whatsoever, for an attempt, on the part of his "pal" and himself, at a get-away, and his "pal" was still out there.

"A little thing like law never bothers *them*, you know," he observed, "and letters don't get out." He added: "You people can check me up on all of this, if you want to. I've got the negro's name,—he came all the way over there on his mule to tell 'em he found his coat. Imagine a *nigger* being that decent!"

He paused, after a little, and glanced hesitatingly at Nancy and Mrs. Burns. "I don't believe you ladies want to hear the rest," he said. "I'll tell *you*, sir," to Mr. Payne, "that, and some other things." He looked toward Nancy, suddenly, frowning, then back to the minister. "And I'll show you, too. Is there a place—?"

Mr. Payne rose and opened the door into a vacant office next. Brannon stopped before the

threshold to ask Nancy: "Could you be trying to get something about himself, now, out of the old fellow? You can, if you'll go slow enough with him. They transferred him and me, too, to the Poor House last month"—Nancy started—"when I was about to croak, just after they beat me up the last—oh! well. And he's been nursing me like a regular professional. We slipped off from 'em on this little lark to-day." He grinned and limped after Mr. Payne into the adjoining room, closing the door behind him.

Nancy and Mrs. Burns stared at each other, silently. "It makes you feel—violent—doesn't it?" asked Mrs. Burns in a moment. Her lips were pressed tight and her eyes were snapping sparks. "Go get the old man, Nancy."

He was asleep in his chair.

They got his name, and his daughter's name, and post-office, after patient, pitying effort. Of the Farm he would not talk at all. "Probably beaten into him out there that he mustn't," commented Nancy. She called a faithful old stand-by and arranged for lodging for the two, pending disposition.

Mr. Payne came in as she was talking over the telephone. "You'd better get a doctor to dress this boy's back," he said, in an undertone to Mrs. Burns. "He thinks it's all right now, but it looks mighty ugly to me—slight infection, I'd say, from the open welts of a beating he got some time ago. The boy's had no real care, since." He shook his

head, scowling angrily. Glancing Nancy's way, as Brannon, too, had done, his scowl deepened.

"Take them both to old Mrs. Bettson's for us, will you?" Mrs. Burns asked. "We'll send Dr. Singleton down."

Near noon Mr. Payne returned, and he and V. A. Craig sat across a table from Nancy and Mrs. Burns in conference.

"Get your affidavit from Brannon," advised Craig, "and then the Parson, here," he smiled, "bein' an innocent-lookin' party that nobody suspects, can amble on out to the county farm in his buggy, with a bunch of tracts or somethin'—What *are* they givin' out now?" he stopped to ask.

Everybody laughed.

"As I was sayin'," he continued unruffled, "can amble on out and ask to hold a meetin'. They won't refuse. Once get 'em all in and he can spot this pal of Brannon's by that birthmark he told about and take him off to convert him, because of his extreme youth—maybe. Anything like that. It'll be easy enough to get his statement then, to check against Brannon's, and the parson makes his own affidavit later. See?"

"I see," observed Mr. Payne, with a show of severity, "that you are using the Lord's religion and servants for your own purposes."

"They're good purposes, aren't they?"

"I'll go," agreed the minister, smiling, "but I'll do things a little differently, I think. I'll also call

back by the Poor House and tell them we'll handle their two patients for them."

Craig looked dubious. "Careful you don't spill the beans, then." He had very little opinion of the practical sagacity of ministers.

"Any way of getting a look at Protheroe's docket?" queried Nancy.

Craig shook his head. "It would be fixed when you saw it. There'll be some kind of record book at the Farm, though. Mr. Payne might—" he stopped, obviously entertaining small hope of the "parson."

The latter laughed good-humoredly and left them.

At nine the next morning he reported, affidavit in hand, already witnessed by a notary. He had gotten into the camp without much difficulty, stating calmly to the warden that he wished to inspect the place, meet the men and arrange for a series of religious meetings in the near future; also that he was especially interested in the case of one Alvin Brooks, a stranger of whom he had heard, whose home was in New Jersey, and that he would appreciate an interview. Rather to his own surprise he secured it, and in private. He made few notes until he had started homeward.

On questioning a guard he was told that there was no record kept at the Farm, but, stopping in the office, he observed a large ledger under a pile of dirty newspapers, pointed to it, asked to see it, and studying it, found this entry, a replica of

which he showed Nancy in his affidavit: "Brooks, Alvin—white—23. Committed vag. and petit larc. Feb. 15th—180 da."

He thereupon left the office amid a dead silence on the part of the warden and two guards, and proceeded upon his way.

"Just like that!" Nancy gasped. "Sherlock Holmes could have done no more!"

He handed her quietly, then, a written record of his inspection of the County Poor House, made on the way home.

The first words she read were: "Keeper, Jack Reynolds, former guard at County Convict Camp, appointed by Judge Protheroe on taking office November 1st."

She groaned, "Please tell the Board to fire me at the next meeting, Mr. Payne. I didn't know that—I've never even been to the place, though I was going, any day. I don't know who's out there. I don't know anything, I think, except what's before my nose."

She read on. "Reynolds' bid in the County Court per head, for care of paupers, was \$25.00 per month, payment to him, exclusive of county payment for clothing, drugs, furniture, farm supplies, salary of keeper at \$100 a month and maintenance of self and family."

"Why!" cried Nancy, "that's an improvement. The last keeper's bid was only \$12 a month per pauper. I looked it up. Reynolds is spending twice as much on them."

"No," said Mr. Payne. "He's not. He's spending *less* than the last man. It's *not* an improvement. It's a method of payment of money squeezed from the pauper allowance and owed Protheroe by Reynolds, who is too worthless and fond of liquor to earn any of his own. Brooks told me so, and I believe it. Read further and you will, too."

She turned a page. "Two meals a day—fat pork the only meat—hogs killed Christmas and on 4th of July. Milk-cows have been recently sold. Preserved fruits put up by inmates last summer are for use of 'officers only.'" Further down: "Officers consist of keeper, his wife, four children, one step-daughter with husband and two children. Number officers, ten; number inmates, seventeen."

"Land poor, plant pretty good but sanitary conditions fearful, negro quarters unspeakably so—only attendant for aged helpless negroes recently discharged as matter of 'economy'—when she was there place was 'kept nice,' was told."

Nancy hid her face in her arms, on the table, in utter distress and shame.

"Child, child!" said the minister, laying a gentle hand on her hair. "Are you to blame for the sins of the whole world? Suppose you weren't the first to find out these things in these few months past? Is it not *my* business to have done so and the board's business and the town's business as well—this generous, wealthy town of ours that simply doesn't know?" He smiled. "You are twenty-

one, aren't you? Twenty-two? That is why you want to make the old earth over in a day, then. Come, let's call our executive committee together" (he was a member) "and divide this burden that is weighing your little shoulders down so."

A few days later, a serious-faced committee waited upon Judge Protheroe, facts and affidavits in hand,—where they stayed, by the way, for future reference.

"We preferred to bring the facts to you first, sir," stated Mr. Joyce sternly, "before giving them to the membership of this Association and to the public." He was a man of few and emphatic words.

"Quite proper, gentlemen," was Protheroe's urbane response. "I appreciate your coming to me, and will, of course, take immediate steps to correct these abuses." He shook his head, frowning. "Abuses creep into any system, you know, in spite of the utmost watchfulness. And when the 'boss' is not continuously present—well, you all see what happens! It's very discouraging."

It must have been, indeed, for he lost, thereby, one useful prisoner, by name Alvin Brooks, one husky and over-zealous guard, one set of relatives of Jack Reynolds, Esquire, and, lastly, one rather bad temper.

CHAPTER XI

THIS WAY TO THE LEGISLATURE!

"I THINK," Nancy observed suspiciously, "that you're trying to beat me out of my job, Molly Burns!"

She stood over the latter, who was, in an official breathing space, deep in a volume with the ambitious title, *Misery—Its Causes and Cure*. On the table at her elbow lay the pile of printed material concerning other States which had been forwarded by Spencer Ames. Mrs. Burns smiled broadly and turned a page.

"Pretty soon," went on Nancy, severely, "you'll know more than I do, at the rate you're going, and that is the unpardonable sin on the part of an Assistant Secretary. Remember, ungrateful woman, I put you here."

"Yes," replied that ungrateful lady, "but when you leave to marry Doctor Bob—what then?"

"Oh! 'Sits the wind in *that* corner?'" Nancy was irate. "There is ab-so-lute-ly nothing to that, and you know it!"

"Yes?" said Mrs. Burns, still smiling, and she turned another page.

Nancy shook her—half amused but half irri-

tated, and, finding her exertions wasted, sailed out of the office in a moment, tip-tilted little chin in the air, to buy the railway tickets for her two young convict-camp *protégés*, whose families had each wired money. The old man was safe in a state hospital.

Now, so completely had Nancy discounted what she considered Bob's sentimental *lapsus mentis* on the day of her return, that she retailed Mrs. Burns' remark to him that night, with a most breezy unconcern. He was, as usual, "at ease" and puffing away at his pipe, as he had been all evening, looking like some lazy Buddha, Nancy commented, making his own floating blue incense before his face. She had been watching the curling, gray-blue veils of it a moment before she observed: "You know, I think you smoke entirely too much, for a surgeon."

Bob sat up at once in genuine alarm.

"See here, Nancy!" he said, "you haven't gone and joined the W. C. T. U. or anything like *that*, have you?"

Nancy smiled. "I might easily do worse things."

He shook his head in profound disagreement with that statement. "They'll tackle tobacco—seriously—next," he declared. "Well! They'll take it over *my* dead body!"

Nancy laughed aloud. "Men are funny," she said, but did not vouchsafe an explanation.

"Women are not, of course?" he rejoined amusedly.

"*I'm* not," Nancy stated positively. "I'm *very* sensible and strong-minded and—er—modern, you know. We," she said it largely, "don't go in any more for the old-style feminine weaknesses and the cunning little vices and vanities of the Clinging Vine. And all that is what you men mean, of course, when you say that women are 'funny.'"

"Is it?" asked Bob. "Good of you to explain like this—certainly is!"

She ignored the sarcasm.

"Molly *is* funny, though," she smiled. And it was then she told him of the morning's conversation.

Bob threw back his head and laughed heartily—very heartily. "Ridiculous!" he exclaimed.

Nancy shot a slightly startled glance at him. He was carefully knocking the ashes from his pipe, still with an amused smile. There was a curious little mixture of expressions on her face, but insulted self-esteem triumphed, momentarily.

"Well!" she said, explosively. "Suppose it's *not* true. You needn't be so—surely it isn't as ab—" and she stopped short.

"Yes?" queried Bob composedly, leaning back and studying her. "You were saying——?"

"Oh! nothing," with a flush of irritation. She began upon a new topic of conversation.

But there was the faintest, barely perceptible chill in the air for the twenty minutes or so following, until Bob rose to leave. The smile upon his

face, as he proceeded down the front walk into the night, was a wicked little one of pure satisfaction. He was chalking up Score I. "'Very sensible and strong-minded and—er—modern, you know,'" he quoted to himself as he walked away.

Nancy ran into "her" school-teacher in the Court House corridor before working hours the next morning.

"Oh! Clara," she called. "I waited for you Saturday. Why didn't you come?"

"I couldn't," answered Clara, otherwise known as Miss Bingham. "My entire family was in bed with bronchitis and I was somewhat engaged." She was the plucky eldest sister in a perpetually "hard-up" family of eight. "But come on in here, now, Nancy. I've only a little while to stay. And please shoo anybody else out. I've *got* to talk to you."

"Miserable office," Nancy commented, disparagingly, as they entered, "but we can't afford to pay rent yet. Anyway an office in the Court House is supposed to be grand and official. My idea of grandeur, though," she added, "is a long suite—you know the kind—with my sacred sanctum at one end, and low-voiced sub-assistants rising up in succession on the way to it to tell Mayors and Judges and the like, 'Miss Carroll is in conference now. She may not be seen until four.' That sort of thing, you know, Clara."

Miss Bingham looked around the empty office and smiled. She had a nice smile that lighted a

rather plain, serious face. "Small chance of that here."

Nancy nodded ruefully. "We're right in the muck and thick of it. When it's crowded in this place I take my girls around to the soda-fountain and we talk over the ice-cream saucers. I have lunch with doubtful ladies I'm trying to size up. Bob and I stop by for kids and take 'em out driving. And there's a dear old lady who's always inviting me to supper. I guess it's more fun to be sociable than grand—after all," she finished thoughtfully. "Good lesson in democracy."

"That's all very interesting," rejoined Miss Bingham, dryly, "but suppose you let *me* talk now, Nancy. I've got to teach school to-day."

They sat down and she talked rapidly. Every minute or so the word "Protheroe" rose to the surface. "Good Lord!" said Nancy, appalled. "Everywhere I turn it's that man! Is he omnipresent, like the Deity? We're working on the Poor House now, he's been messing up, not to speak of the Convict Camp, *et cetera*."

"You'll have to take this on, too," responded Miss Bingham, unfeelingly. "Nobody but you can handle it." Nancy obediently got out a pad and began to make notes.

It was a little tragedy in a teapot, but the end of the world to the people concerned. Liney Vinson, Nancy's "Amazon" of school days, possessed a mother by the name of Sarah—she of the corn-cob pipe—who, having tried numerous husbands

and found them unsatisfactory things to have around, had been playing a lone hand for some five years, raising her brood of little tow heads and working her own "forty" with the assistance of Liney. Enter a drought and the villain—in the person of Jim Protheroe—simultaneously. Two hundred dollars was borrowed and crop, chattel, and land mortgages given. "Mere form," Protheroe told her. She was sure there was one date of maturity on the note but the actual note inconveniently bore another, a little in advance of the time she was ready to make her first partial payment. Hence—as result—dramatic seizure, "last Wednesday a week ago," of the family mainstay, Jephtha,—one large and balky white mule,—with more trouble coming; black despair in the Vinson household, and civil war in the school-yard between the tearful, indignant Liney and her supporters, and the Protheroe faction!

"Easy," declared Nancy, scribbling fast. "Carter Simms is the best lawyer in Carrollton and a particular pal of mine. And Carter's a sleuth-hound on the scent of a crook. I'll just turn him loose and he'll do Protheroe up nice and brown."

She called him and made an appointment, "Bring Mrs. Vinson in this afternoon to see him, Clara; and oh! will you bring Alice Madden in Friday to spend the week-end with me and see how she likes a home I've found where she can stay and go to High School after midyears—as we've planned?"

"Yes," agreed Miss Bingham. "I'll be thankful to. She's a beauty and poor, and it'll be one more danger off my hands."

Nancy smiled, in a pleasantly superior, efficient glow.

"Are you under the impression," asked Clara Bingham pointedly, "that you're through with me, now?"

Nancy sat back limply and grasped her pencil again. "Go on," she directed, stoically.

"I don't know what Jim Protheroe is made of," continued Miss Bingham slowly. "He's a brand-new style of person in my category and I can't seem to grasp him. It isn't exactly wickedness, for the love of it."

"It's money," stated Nancy, "simply money. He told me so himself once. Said he'd fought for it ever since he was born and he meant to have it—lots of it—before he died. Said, 'If I've got a God I guess it's financial success.' Yes! He was quite melodramatic and intense about it and then tightened up again, in a flash, and looked embarrassed. He's entirely logical and consistent, you see, Clara. If he went in for humane conduct and regard for the conflicting rights of others he'd lose a little money and he wouldn't get to where he wants to go nearly as fast. Don't you see?"

"Humph!" remarked Miss Bingham, unimpressed by the logic of Protheroe's position. "He's most likely going where he'd rather not go—eventually. But here's his latest, Nancy. I got

it from the wife of the oldest school-director, who talked too much."

She briefly outlined a most ingenious little scheme of Protheroe's and his "dummy directors," which involved the sale of the present school and its site for almost nothing, supposedly—the district to get the "nothing" and the directors the difference between it and the real sale price. A worthless piece of land belonging to Protheroe was then to be purchased, for a new and "more central" school site, at the largest price he dared to put upon it, and a petition was to be circulated and brought before Protheroe, as county judge, requesting him to create a special school district of number twenty-one. Once made into a special school district the legal powers of the directors were wide. Needing building funds, they could, if they so willed, put up every foot of property in the district as collateral and issue improvement bonds.

"In other words," she finished, "they—which means *he*—can mortgage the district to some trust company just as Mrs. Vinson is mortgaged to Protheroe. I may not be expressing it legally, but I trust I'm clear."

"You're only too clear," Nancy replied, frowning. "Suppose this petition can be blocked—will that settle it?"

"No. They could still go to the State Legislature, with a local bill to create a special school district, and local bills are easy to pass, they say.

Everybody just votes for 'em as a courtesy to the local representatives."

"The Legislature," Nancy repeated slowly. "Protheroe intends to run for the next Legislature—for Senator, so V. A. Craig says, and he always knows."

Miss Bingham sat back heavily in her chair. "Oh! Good heavens, what's the use!" she said disgustedly.

"The Legislature," Nancy repeated again, pondering. "We may dabble around here—get a guard fired at the convict farm—oust some hangers on at the Poor House and put in a nurse; have a few religious services for the poor wretches; take 'em some old magazines—but what is that? It's what Jack London called 'sprinkling rose water into an abyss.' If we want a whack at the convict lease system in this state we've got to go—to the Legislature. If we feel the same way about the leasing of paupers by the head—take it to the Legislature. And now, even in this minor matter, if we stop this petition it'll still be fought out—in the Legislature. And Protheroe's going there. All roads lead to Rome. Well—" deliberately—"what's the matter with our going to Rome, too Clara?"

Clara Bingham leaned forward with a kindling light in her plain but likable and determined face.

"Suits me," she declared, with emphasis. "Course I'd lose my job and a few little things like

that, but if I could help put a crimp in that scoundrel and loosen his grip on that poor fool district out there—" She paused. "That would sort of justify one's existence," musingly. "You just put me down in your engagement-book right now, Nancy, for assistant in shady politics one year from next month."

"A year!" Nancy groaned.

"You mere infant." Miss Bingham laughed at her. "Time always looks like eternity to the very young. That isn't nearly time *enough* to get your facts and information together and line up backing for the kind of fight you've been talking about. Don't you know that, child?"

"I suppose not," agreed Nancy meekly.

Her companion glanced at her watch hurriedly and rose. "Well," she said, "that's *then*. What about *now*? A counter petition, of course, but—"

"Call a mother's meeting for to-morrow at the schoolhouse on some pretext or other—send word home by the children. I'll come out and ask to speak, on my own initiative, to protect you, and we'll put it over. That's all."

Miss Bingham laughed, saluted, and departed.

Nancy reached for her hat and proceeded straightway across the street to the printing office where V. A. Craig worked. He had not gone on at his machine yet, as she had thought, and she mounted the stairs and settled herself down to talk to him upon a pile of old newspapers, fastidiously dusting them off first with a dainty handkerchief.

He grinned down at her. It was a most dry, shrewd, delightful little grin. "What's on your mind?" he asked.

"V. A.," began Nancy soberly—they had become fast friends and, anyway, everybody in the state, from the Governor down, called him "V. A."—"you told me once that you had no use for my Public Welfare Association, or any charity organization you knew, because we dabbled only in symptoms—and I got mad, do you remember?"

He nodded.

"Well! I came over to tell you you were right."

"Sure I was right," he said coolly. "Always am. Haven't you found that out yet?"

She made a face at him. "Be sensible, V. A., or at least be as sensible as you *can* be. I desire to hold serious converse with you"—loftily—"about a decision of far-reaching consequence which I have——"

He interrupted. "You came over to tell me that you're a candidate for admission to the Third House."

"What's the 'Third House'?"

"It is that organization," he defined, smiling, "whose purpose is to tell the other two houses of the Legislature how to vote on all questions, and it is composed of 'childlike and bland' souls like myself. In fact," he added, "I am President, Secretary, and Treasurer, likewise Board of Directors. That ought to give you some idea of its character—or lack of it, rather."

Nancy smiled, too, but she asked, amazedly, "How did you know about me?"

"It's only a question of time," he answered, "before everybody who is tryin' to do anything at all in this state—even make money—comes to it. Bein' the bright child you are I figured you'd come rather soon, and you have—that's all."

"Since you know as much about me as I do," said Nancy, "suppose you tell me how best to go about this."

"Well," he replied thoughtfully, "you might come down and get acquainted with the boys. You won't go very far without 'em, certainly. We've seen to that."

Nancy was full of questions and hungry for details but could elicit nothing further. She found herself, pretty soon, quite calmly dismissed, feeling baffled and a little cross. V. A. was always doing people like that. He said what he considered necessary or useful, then quit, whether the other person was ready to or not. And if people's feathers were ruffled, why, so much the more fools they! He was the first person Nancy had ever seen who actually cared not a whit what anyone thought of him. Lots of people pretended they didn't, but he never pretended that or anything else and never bothered, either, about stupid little customs like politeness and explanations. Perhaps that was why Bob thought so much of him. They were rather alike in some respects. And then, too,

as Bob said, V.A. was "that rare thing, a self-made man who's done a good job of it."

He had never been inside a schoolroom since he was ten, and a little begrimed printer's "devil," and yet his restless, prowling street-gamin mind had poked around, curiously, into great places and many of them. You could find him reading anything from the Congressional Record to *Creative Evolution*, or discussing, with succinct detail, the British electorate in one breath and the White Sox's chances in the next. About the only thing he didn't know, Nancy thought, was how to look out for his own personal advantage. As head of the Labor Federation he was always emerging from some heated fight or other for the benefit of a woe-begone cause—negro sawmill hands in Hicksville or a lot of Greek waiters on strike somewhere—with a surprised and rueful grin in the direction of his empty pockets. It was perhaps a good thing that he was a bachelor. He was never known to have any money. And yet about half the people who criticized him considered him a mercenary crook of the most dangerous and depraved description, mostly because—his supporters said—he had "licked 'em all to a fare-you-well," at one time or another, and, being unable to fathom his methods, because of lacking the requisite amount of gray matter, people expressed their consequent irritation in the form of abuse.

A few days after her conversation with the gentleman, and her round-up of support enough to

launch a strong counter petition in School District 21, Nancy received an invitation to address the Machinists' Union upon the subject of her work and plans.

It was the first of several such invitations. Nancy went eagerly, after the initial time. Labor unions were much nicer to talk to than church societies, she confided to no less churchly a person than Mr. Payne, one afternoon in his study. "When you get through telling *them* the rawest, wretchedest facts, in an effort to stimulate 'em to action, they don't smile sweetly upon you and say, 'My dear, you don't know *how* we've enjoyed —'enjoyed,' mind you!—your talk. *Do* come again soon!'"

Mr. Payne chuckled. "They aren't women—that's the only answer to that. The ladies have perfected certain set forms of social expression. Men haven't."

"Well," admitted Nancy, smiling, "I think myself your ladies are not as bad as they sound, because they come to meetings now and work like Trojans. They're pretty fine, really."

"But those union men," she went on, seriously, "they're new to me and very, very interesting. Of course V. A. Craig is head and shoulders above the mass of them—above me and my crowd, too, for that matter—but there are real personalities that stand out in those railway shop men. Take that Walter Stone, the head of the Machinists. Do you know him?" Mr. Payne shook his head.

"You'd like him a lot. I'm tremendously impressed by him. He's sort of made in the rough—big, square, unornamental, steady as the hills, honest as daylight, and a fighter, in every line of him. He has power—power enough to take him anywhere, but it's so obscured and groping, that's the pitiful part of it. You know Rodin's *Thinker*, of course? I think of it all the time when I face those crowds of stocky, hard-built workmen, looking up with a dawning interest in what I'm saying. Rodin's man is a taut-strung, mighty giant—with a small, undeveloped skull.

"Walter Stone said to me admiringly, enviously: 'You've been to college, haven't you? God, what wouldn't I give for your education!' And I cringed, you know, thinking of some of the little frothy, high-brow cliques and the Henry James cult and all the insincerities in the place—my own included. I felt such a featherweight."

"But it's done a lot for you," chided Mr. Payne.

He smiled so searchingly that she said: "You're an uncomfortable person. I always have to tell the truth around you, somehow. All right, then, that is unfair. College makes you—like that," she cupped an outstretched hand, with a gesture of moulding—"as a mind to work and think and see beauty with. But it stops there. Something else has to line you up with your times. When the women's colleges do about-face toward the twentieth century, mine will get there first. It's that kind. But when I think of the vital thing

it could be—now—I get ‘unfair’—very. That better?”

In a moment she reverted to her labor unions, frowning.

“There is power in them,” she said again, thoughtfully. “You can *feel* the reinforcement of it when they’re with you—on your side—as they sit there listening. Crowds are queer, anyhow, aren’t they? You can be talking away, getting nowhere, and all of a sudden something electric happens. There’s a quick fusion—a pooling of the wills of all of you into one intense resolve, that’s like a strong sweep of inspiration blowing through the place and taking you up—up—dizzily—high up—Oh! I can’t say what I mean”—impatiently—“but it’s so.”

She looked up at him, brows knit. “It lasts just for a little while. You stop, and the others stop talking and the crowd all disintegrates into little ineffectual human particles and they joke and chatter and somebody hands around sandwiches and coca-cola—and it’s all gone. But what *is* it, Mr. Payne?”

He smiled at her with grave sweetness. “I have a very short and simple word of three letters for it, Nancy,” he said. “I think you know it.”

Nancy fell into a troubled, scowling silence, looking out of a window.

“I think—I don’t understand that,” she remarked at last, worriedly, “or anything else, I decide sometimes, Mr. Payne. And when, once

in a blue moon, I start to look around inside of me and have a clean-up day, I just get kind of appalled at the tangled look of the mess and lose my nerve and back away.

"And, honestly, I haven't time for an indifferently interesting matter like myself when the things outside are all so much more exciting!"

He shook his head at her, in half-amused reproof.

"All right," she answered his look. "Some rainy day, then," lightly, "I'll take stock, I promise, and let you truthfully know what I find. But don't expect very much." And she got up to leave.

Going down his front walk she thought: "What a good old sport he is! Never mentions my soul any more than if I didn't have one. He's a peach!" with enthusiasm.

It is doubtful whether many of the dignified Rev. Mr. Richard Payne's parishioners referred to him often in just such terms.

Talks—plans—conferences, for the rest of the month; a guarded preliminary questionnaire about general conditions to all the state's social workers; reports and pamphlets to be digested at night in preparation for the war of wits not so very far ahead—all that, Nancy began to find, was stirring, vital, provocative of the utmost concentration within her power and of the satisfaction resultant from hard work, decently done.

CHAPTER XII

A REPREHENSIBLE INTERLUDE

ON the day before New Year's Nancy made, in advance, a most reprehensible resolution. She was staring out of her office window at the time upon a bleak, brown landscape.

"I'm sick of being good and conscientious," she announced with startling suddenness. "If I stay in this place another minute I'll begin to feel like my grandmother. I give you fair warning, Molly Burns, I'm going on a tear—immejut!"

"Tear ahead," said Mrs. Burns, amiably. "You've got a spree coming to you."

Nancy proceeded: "Honestly, Molly, I'm not joking about my intentions. First I'm going to the Cotillion to-night—did I tell you? And dance till they convey me home in a stretcher. I may be down by noon to-morrow—may not be,"—airily—"can't tell! And to-morrow afternoon I'm going to a *thé dansant* at the Country Club—oh! a very stylish affair—and Friday there's a little dinner-dance and—well!—then I'm going to see what else I can scare up in the way of excitement. It's a life-and-death case with me, Woman! If I go on being as noble as this much longer without a break,

they'll be picking up my fragments in the suburbs after the explosion! I'm telling you, now!"

She nodded an emphatic little head, with a glint of mischief and deviltry in her anything but secretarial countenance. Then she smiled engagingly upon Mrs. Burns and leaned closer to her.

"You don't mind if I slack a *little*, Scotchy, do you?" she coaxed beguilingly. "I'll let you go on a tear just the minute I'm through."

"Be off with you," ordered Mrs. Burns, sternly. "You and your Blarney."

"Yes'm," said Nancy, meekly, but she rose with suspicious alacrity. "I think I will go on, now, if you don't mind. I've got to buy some clothes to wear."

At the door she paused just long enough to blow a flying kiss, her face, beneath a saucy little black hat with a pompon, brilliant with fun and reckless humor.

Mrs. Burns regarded the empty doorway with a thoughtful smile, for several seconds.

"Heaven help all unattached males!" she said piously, in a moment, and returned to her work, still smiling.

Nancy proceeded blithely down Main Street, stopping to look in all the shop windows. Presently a good-looking blond young fellow hastened up to her.

"Oh, Nance!" he exclaimed in relieved tones. "Just the person I want. For heaven's sake tell me what kind of flowers you'd like to wear to-night.

It'd be just my fool luck, you know, to send you bright red roses when you're wearing pink. What color *are* you wearing?"

Nancy considered: a nice, artistic lie versus the unadorned truth. Truth was safer, she decided.

"Why, really, Dick," she smiled. "Not knowing, I feel a slight hesitation in saying! I'm dress-hunting now. But I'll tell you what you do," with a sudden delighted inspiration. "Get me one of those darling little stiff, lace-paper-edged bouquets—you know—colonial bouquets. They'll go with anything. That'll be perfectly lovely of you," she added.

"I'd like to be 'lovely' the worst way," observed Dick, whose last name was Sattler, grinning. "I'll do that little thing, Nancy. 'Bye. Be sure and get a pretty one," he called back.

"Sensible man," said Nancy approvingly, and resumed her journey, arriving in due time in the ready-to-wear department of Ernstein's "store."

"No, I don't know what color I want," she said to the saleslady. "But I'll know my dress when I see it. You just show 'em all to me, will you?" Her comments were frank. One she vetoed with the simple observation, "Age, forty-five years," and of the next, a sinuous orange affair, she said in deep disapproval, "Looks like Theda Bara! I don't want a gown, you see," she explained. "I want a frock. There's a vast difference."

In a moment there it was, the predestined dress—a dream of April in pale apple-green taffeta and

woven silver ribbons, with bewitching ruffles and a silver-threaded tulle bodice.

"And with that little bright adorable bouquet!" cried Nancy ecstatically. "I'll take it," and quite as an afterthought, "What's the price?"

"Sixty-seven dollars and fifty cents," said the girl; and Nancy, with a slight gasp, stoically wrote a check. She wrote several, in fact—for slippers, silk hose, and everything else she could think of at the moment, carefully avoiding bringing down the balance on her stubs. Nancy's stoicism was assumed. In reality, she enjoyed the mere act of passing money across a counter—perhaps because she did it so seldom.

Her Cousin Lætitia, beholding the frock, and with a piercing eye upon the bodice, gave an exclamation of pure horror and ascended agitatedly to her sewing-room, amid shrieks of laughter from Nancy, to hunt in vain for scraps of anything that might "match" and amplify. With some difficulty she was appeased and petted into docility.

Dick Sattler's comment, when Nancy fluttered lightly down her old curving stairway in the soft glow of the candles about the walls, waving his gay little bouquet at him, was the eloquent one of silence, but the jolly cotillion crowd, greeting her as a lost and straying sheep returned to the fold, was not so conservative with its opinions.

"I feel exactly like Cinderella," she told Dick, parading about with him in the "Grand Promenade." "But the clock will strike twelve and I'll

have to put on blue serge again and look up Case 21."

She sighed. Public Welfare was, at that moment, an arid waste before her.

Dick smiled down at her. "Fine opening for the Prince," he answered meaningly; and then he, too, heaved a sigh of mock despair. "But his name's Singleton," he mourned. "And, by the way, why isn't he up here on the job to-night?"

"Bob? Why is this town so busy marrying us off?" she countered. Then she laughed. "You couldn't drag Bob Singleton to a 'function' with steel cables. He says the men at them are all revolving around some girl, and the girls are just plain revolving around—and he has something better to do! Old Grizzly!"

A silvery whistle blew and they whirled away.

"Teach me every single new step, Dick," Nancy begged. "Think! I haven't been to but one dance since college. I'm an awful back number." They had a most hilarious time of it and sank into their chairs, breathless with laughter.

It was about an hour afterwards when her trusty pal, Carter Simms, who had arrived late, appeared suddenly before her chair, as Dick sprang up to acknowledge a favor, with a new man in tow, and announced, smiling broadly: "Nance, here's a little stranger I knew at Princeton, who's been standing in the door with me ever since we came, gazing your way and dying to meet you. He's a timid little soul, as you see. Be nice to him!"

Nancy surveyed the "little stranger" interestedly. Most of the other people in the ballroom were doing the same thing. He was well over six feet and quite the most easily poised and stunning individual she had yet seen in her travels, she decided; also one obviously born to the purple.

"Name, age, and place of residence, please?" she inquired of him in her most professional investigator's manner. Carter laughed and left them.

"Avery Standish—New York City—under thirty—at your service," he complied smoothly.

"What a lovely name!" cried Nancy, with enthusiasm. "You sound like a book."

His ordinarily cold, finely cut face was full of a smiling warmth, as he stood looking down at her.

"Nancy is a nice name, too," he said judiciously, "but your name really ought to be Primavera, you know."

And, whimsically, he struck a devotional attitude, apostrophizing her: "Fair Princess! The desire of my heart at this moment is to drop upon a reverent knee and kiss your lily-white hand. But alas! I fear me it would startle the natives overmuch!"

A delicate, gleeful little flag of color fluttered in Nancy's smiling cheek.

"Rise, Sir Knight," she told him, with hauteur. "There is dancing toward and a waltz is not a thing to be wasted." And they slipped suavely into the throng upon the floor.

"You dance like a—a daffodil," he said presently, as they moved in and out with a swift grace.

"And you talk like a poet," she returned. Then, curiously, "Who are you, anyway, Mister Man, and what are you down here for?"

As has been previously stated, Nancy had a habit of asking leading questions as a short-cut to the information desired. "Why not?" she always argued.

"Oh! I'm a person of no particular consequence," he answered, rather untruthfully, "and I thought I came down here to buy long staple cotton for some Atlantic Coast mills with which I'm connected," (his connection was that of owner) "but I find that wasn't my reason at all." They both smiled. "Who are *you*?"

"I?" said Nancy. "I'm a po' woikin' goil of these parts and I run a charity office, and do general reformation on the side."

"That's very fine of you," he responded approvingly. Had she said that she sold shoestrings for a living his comment would have been the same.

It was not Mr. Avery Standish's custom to converse while he danced, but then he had never before danced with anyone who had eyes that were sea-blue with laughter one moment and that deepened into shadowed violet the next. He craftily thought up questions to ask her so that she would not look away.

His last one was: "Couldn't you take up my case for—er—very special investigation and treatment, beginning, say, at lunch time to-morrow? I'll get hold of something on wheels and come after you."

The agreement was entered into by the parties of the first and second parts.

"What is there to do in this teeming metropolis?" he next inquired. "Couldn't we manage to paint Main Street at least a mild pink?"

"We could try," replied Nancy, doubtfully. "In fact, I made a New Year's resolution to that effect this morning, but—" shrugging in sham despondency—"I realized the foolhardy rashness of it at the time."

"You don't know me," said Standish, reassuringly. "I am a man of infinite resources and great native genius as a promoter. I guarantee satisfaction. All I ask is a trial."

He lived up to his guarantee nobly, in the week following. They embarked frivolously upon what the Carrollton *Daily Post* would infallibly have described as a "round of gaiety." If there wasn't a dinner-dance or *thé dansant*, the vogue for which was raging wildly that season, there was a charming little dinner and theater party, achieved under expert direction. When all else failed there was the humble movie and, daily, flowers. Nancy had never before been so masterfully stage-managed, by so perennially delightful a director. She dashed guiltily into the office at intervals, and worked intermittently at odd hours to atone for her de-

sertion, but Mrs. Burns did not even look a reproach.

"Old Lamb!" cried Nancy remorsefully, hugging her. "I'll make it up to you."

The only dark spot in the rose-hued week was an evening when Nancy had Standish and Bob at her home for dinner. Miss Lætitia apparently enjoyed the affair. Certainly no one else did. There were long silences into which Nancy rushed with speech she knew to be vapid. Bob was gruffer than she had ever known him to be, Standish more flippant and trivial.

She exploded wrathfully after Bob's early departure, and Standish regarded her with lazy amusement.

"The amazing thing," he said, "the thing I didn't believe at first, is that you really are as dense—about everything that concerns you personally—as you seem!"

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Nancy, with some indignation.

"Merely a thing that is apparent to the naked eye, my dear child—that the gentleman in question is in love with you—too!"

"Nonsense!" Nancy said positively, ignoring the "too." "He's known me all my life."

"All the more reason," replied Standish, imperturbably. "Now, *I've* only known you a few days, and I am—hopelessly."

Nancy leaned forward and gazed upon him with greatly exaggerated solicitude. "Are you too far

gone, do you suppose," she inquired anxiously, "to walk over to that piano and play some Chopin for me?"

After he had left the house that night she sat, for some time, in the dark on the rug before the embers of the log fire in her living-room. She was engaging in the old, all-but-forgotten college game of psycho-analysis.

Standish was clever. He knew his way about the planet, having been everywhere one could well go; he was something of a connoisseur of things rare and beautiful; he had read widely, if not deeply; he had had so much money for so long that he had forgotten about it; he was, quite enviably, the urbane captain of his soul, with the mechanics of his existence delegated to an inferior crew. But was it such a strenuous job—being captain of that soul? Wasn't it an awfully well-behaved, up-holstered, smooth-faring soul? She had sensed his instinctive recoil as he sat in her office, one morning, waiting for her, while a particularly wretched lot of "charity patients" also waited. She was remembering that.

Thinking further, she came again upon her first word for him—clever. It implied a great deal that might sound rather carping and querulously critical if put into words, and he *was* a dear, after all. Oh! well, why mount the judgment seat? She hoped she might deserve a better term than "clever" if at the bar, but perhaps she'd get another just as bad.

Nancy stretched her slim arms above her head and yawned sleepily. Oh! how tired—tired she was of chatter and bright meaningless smiles at people that were boring her very inside soul. Sometimes her face ached from the strain of hours of fixed gaiety. Six days of it and she was ready to throw up her hands and cry quits!

She thought of a pile of "undone" and once-detested records at the office with a sort of hungry pleasure. How good and solid work was—and soothing to the natural self. No impression to be made on anyone, by it, no obligatory end to keep up, no sense of guilt if one slumped into hours of silence and concentration. Standish was all right, and so was each of the others—as a person,—but "Society," as defined in Carrollton and everywhere else, she supposed, was all wrong. At least it was for her.

Her last (but one) waking thought was about Standish. It was too bad he didn't know that it would really improve his style if he'd be serious, occasionally—better still, if he'd be downright disagreeable and humanly grumpy once in a while.

And some ten minutes later she thought drowsily, half smiling, "like Bob."

But two days later she was wishing, in some dismay, that Standish would quit being serious and laugh again.

They had stopped at her home, after a tingling, frosty ride of two hours, for a cup of tea, in the firelight. Standish was holding his left hand be-

fore the blaze and watching the play of light on a diamond he wore, set in a heavy gold ring.

"You are like this diamond," he said, slowly, "many-sided, and every side as brilliant. And underneath the cool glitter and sparkle of you there is fire, as there is here—look. But, too, like this jewel, you are badly set, and I'd like to set you—the most exquisite thing I have ever known—exquisitely."

"Don't you like my house?" asked Nancy, surprised into saying the first thing she was thinking.

"Of course," he answered her, impatiently. "Your house is charming. I'd duplicate it for you, if you wished." ("Would he duplicate Cousin Lætitia and Bob and Molly Burns for me, too?" she thought.)

"But Nancy, Nancy," he went on, deeply moved, "to see you wasting the rare and precious beauty and glow of you on those hideous, sordid dregs of humans, and that hard, sordid work. I want so terribly to put you serenely high above it. Let me!"

"You sound," Nancy objected coolly, "as though I were a nice, sunshiny Sorolla you wanted for your walls—or some other desirable *objet d'art*. I'm not, you know. I'm me!"

He looked at her humbly. "I'm a blundering duffer," he said. "Because I mean this so hard I'm getting all twisted, you see, and saying the little things I mean instead of the big ones." He leaned forward, his eyes on his clasped hands, be-

fore him, toward the blaze. "Forgive me, and help me tell you that I—care for you as I never thought I could care for anything there is. I've been mad about you—mad—from the first second there in that ballroom."

"Oh!" cried Nancy, in real distress, "don't think it—don't! It isn't true, you see, and I don't want you hurt over something that isn't even true—when you're such a dear, besides. No, wait!" as he made a quick movement toward her. "Please!" She stopped, reaching for words.

"You're a poet," she began presently, "as I told you once before. You have a poet's imagination. Beauty is necessary to you, and when you don't find it you create it, by the work of that same imagination. So much for that.

"And then—I'm a good fellow, you think. We've been congenial pals. We've talked philosophy and frivolity, the color of our souls, and the scheme of the universe. So you think you know me. But you don't. There are whole fields and tracts in me that you don't even know are there—that would be alien territory to you. And there are lots of horrid little things about me that you haven't seen. I can be nastily cross and irritable when I'm tired; I want my own way—right or wrong; I hang on to an idea till Death does us part; I'm emotional and moody, and hard-headed—and stubborn—" she enumerated conscientiously.

"And adorable," he finished. "Such a clean little sport you are!" His somewhat unsteady

voice and his eyes were warm. "You play the game so straight and squarely, you little wonderful Nancy. I didn't know they made 'em like you." He stood up. "I've got to play fair, too, haven't I? All right. But I want to tell you some things you may smile at now, and think about—later.

"There are whole 'fields and tracts' in me, too, and in that Singleton fellow, that *you* don't see, don't even know are there. You just don't understand, do you, little dear Nancy?" His voice was a caress. "And I don't think I could make you—now—if I'm the one to make you at all."

He looked steadily down into her eyes, meeting his gallantly. "You say that I don't know you well enough. I have only one thing to ask, then, that you let me know you better. To-night I must go back, but I want you to let me write, and come to see you again. I want just a sporting chance, Nancy, that's all."

She gave him a warm smile and a friendly little hand, and he kissed it and smiled back at her, rather miserably.

"*Au revoir*, Princess," he said.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LAUGH THAT WON A STRIKE

ONE afternoon, near the end of February, V. A. Craig strolled into the Welfare Association's office with an air of unconcern and much cheerful persiflage. How Nancy knew she could not have told, but she did know, instantly, that it was an "air" only, that he was anything but unconcerned. She asked no questions, however. She had learned not to hurry V. A.

"How's the Labor Inspector?" he inquired, presently. Nancy had been, on January 1st, appointed by the State Labor Commissioner as Inspector for the county, to enforce the provisions of the new Child Labor and Women's Minimum Wage Laws. It meant a slight addition to her salary and more authority in investigating labor conditions, familiarity with which was required by the exigencies of her work. She had promptly appointed a school-teacher she knew as her "deputy" to do all the routine business of issuing work permits, and had been making, recently, a number of inspections of lumber mills, department stores, and the like.

"Ever happen to go through the Telephone Company's plant?" Craig queried.

"Yes," she answered, "didn't I tell you? No? You've been away so much lately. I think you were up at Big Bend" (the capital city), "at the time, maybe. I should say I did go through it, V. A. Craig! The first thing, because I'd heard tales about it. Why didn't you tell me"—irritably—"about the Minimum Wage Commission's exemption of Telephone Companies? And the Commission didn't send me their list of decisions under the law for two weeks. Some efficiency!" An odd look flickered across his face, which instantly resumed its expression of casual inquiry. She continued:

"Why, I walked in—Miss New and Dignified Inspector effect, you know,—requesting their wage scale, and asking for a look at their books and time cards and so on, and I was at once faced with that protocol providing practical exemption. I felt like seven kinds of a fool. Saved the Commission's face at the expense of my own by pretending I hadn't read their list of decisions yet—had mislaid it, or something, I forget what I said."

"But did you get any facts—that's the point?"

"Certainly I did! I wasn't going to just slink tamely out again with nothing—law or no law—once I was there. I smiled sweetly upon the Manager and said I'd like to see the plant, any way, that it was a shame for people to know as little as I did about the operation of their public utilities,

and so forth. He was a little grouchy but he sent me through and I soaked it all up and made notes afterwards. The Chief Operator was a dear—an ex-telephone girl herself, and she gave me the wage scale, rather reluctantly and shamefacedly, though, V. A. I didn't much blame her for that when I looked at it. They pay 'em about enough to buy two of my hats and a pair of shoes a year, you know. Outrage!"

Craig was smiling as at some inward satisfaction and there was that odd gleam in his eyes again.

"You'll do," he said briefly. It was the only compliment he had ever paid her. "Now, listen—wait, better come in here," and they proceeded into the convenient empty office, next, where Nancy and Mrs. Burns had put a table and some chairs and staked out a temporary claim. They sat down, Nancy with her elbows propped on the table, Craig across from her.

"Now, listen," he said again, sharply. "The District Field Organizer for the National Association of Telephone Operators is in town. Got in last night. He starts work to-day."

Nancy was interested. "You mean he's to organize a local union of those girls, and they'll pull together for better wages? Fine!"

"Well," he rejoined dryly, "I wouldn't be so previous with my adjectives if I were you." He gave her a quick, keen glance. "But you're for this move, now are you? Think it's needed, think it's a plain, public welfare case, believe in the prin-

ciples of organized labor, too, the peaceful strike, walkout, national and international organization—all that?"

"Of course," replied Nancy, wonderingly. "You know I do,—always have—when the 'principles' *are* principles, that is, and aren't distorted into something else."

"Sure of that, are you?" he questioned again, "Sure you understand it all—sure enough of it to stand your ground under fire?"

"I am."

"All right. Now here's what's goin' to happen. This local's goin' to be organized within the week. Some girl will take the lead in it, and she and her assistants will be most promptly fired by the Telephone Company, on some pretext. They've done it other places—they'll do it here. The Union will demand their reinstatement, give out an interview to the papers, present their case to the town in every way we can figure out, and say their prayers. If the Lord's not too busy workin' on the cases of church members He may show the Chickasaw Valley Telephone Company the hand-writin' on the wall, in which event a hallelujah chorus will arise in the land and Mr. Dallas Patterson will depart from thence, rejoicin'."

"Fine!" Nancy cried again, quite enthusiastic.

He smiled a trifle sardonically.

"Yes," he assented. "It would be—if it was goin' to be! But it ain't. Short of the miracle from above I mentioned, we're in for one of the

stiffest fights organized labor has ever faced in this state. And we've got to carry our public or lose. That's where you come in. See? You will be interviewed, as Labor Inspector, asked what you know about the Telephone Company and the claims the girls are makin' and so on. Fortunately, even though it's not subject to your inspection, you—er—*do* know somethin'."

Nancy had been watching him closely for the last few moments.

"V. A. Craig," she interrupted slowly, ominously, suspicion gathering in her eyes. He looked up, all innocence, then grinned wickedly. "V. A. Craig, you——"

Words sufficiently strong failed her. She thumped the table with an emphatic little fist.

"I will *not* be used like this for your own ends," she exclaimed. "I tell you I won't!" She flashed defiance at him. "I won't be made to feel like a wooden checker man being moved from a red square to a black!"

"Well—aren't you?" he countered, coolly. "What am I? What is any representative of a constituency? The purpose of a movement, as I see it, is to move somebody—principally its leaders. When you get to be one, and get out of the sub-class, your cause will dictate your actions, direct, instead of via me, or someone else in the saddle. But that's the only difference. And as for these bein' 'my' ends"—he leaned forward, tapping the table top with his pencil to emphasize his points,

"they're not! And that's *that*. They're yours and your—what d' you call it—Public Welfare Association's equally. Unless, of course," and he shrugged, "your idea is to specialize on poor, down-trodden gunmen and porch climbers and pass up decent workin' girls on the ground, doubtless, that they've never done anything depraved enough to be interestin'."

Nancy smiled, in spite of herself.

"You're a Jesuit, V. A. I'm for your aims and against your methods."

He considered her for a moment, thoughtfully, nodded to himself and continued, unperturbed.

"Suppose I had told you the Telephone Company was not subject to inspection. Would you have gone there, officially, in all good faith, and then bluffed through?"

"No, I guess not."

"Then you would have been useless now."

"Why?"

"Facts before and facts during a controversy are two different things."

He proceeded. "Suppose I had told you that the sole purpose of your appointment was to make you of some official value in a proposed Telephone strike. Would you have accepted?"

"No."

"Check," he said. "Now, do you see?"

"But," Nancy cried, hotly. "To work me, to use me like this—keeping me ignorant——"

"You?" he said deliberately. "Who are you?"

Nancy sat still for a moment, recovering.

"Why need I have been Labor Inspector to be useful?" she inquired, more mildly, in a moment. "You just said, yourself, that this was my organization's business as well as your labor people's."

"You run a charity office," he stated. "Talk welfare generalities and prevention all you please—you run a charity office. Those telephone girls would die before they'd be seen in that room in there, every one of 'em. If you hadn't made a big hit with the boys even this present scheme wouldn't work—for the charity taint. I'll have to talk my arm off to 'em, as it is."

Nancy gasped. "Was that why you sent me to the unions?"

He shook his head. "About one quarter why, three quarters was for your own benefit, in this work. But *noblesse oblige*. It all dovetails. See here, child," he said, smiling into her puzzled, frowning face. "Don't you know, can't you see, that your fight is our fight, and ours is yours? You can't get away from us to save your soul."

"But I *don't* know," said Nancy, floundering bewilderedly. "I do trust you, V. A., and those union men—but the things you *do*! Was it right to exempt the Telephone Company, for instance, because it brought the most pressure, probably? Why——"

"'Right'?" he spoke impatiently, as to a foolish child. "There's no such thing—ever. In a given instance one thing will be 'righter'—that is, more

apt to work—than another, but they may both be rotten." It was Primer Lesson I, for Nancy, in applied ethics—the ethics of the arena versus those of the laboratory. "The question was to exempt the companies or lose the bill outright," he finished.

"So you planned this thing instead?"

"Not I. Special conference in Washington last October—pivotal state, this—half South, half West. Win here and we sweep the System." Craig hated detailed verbal explanations as a cat hates water. His paragraphs were always full of asterisks.

"I see," said Nancy, slowly. She was seeing a number of things—men in hordes pouring out of factories at the blast of whistles; swarming down mine shafts; stoking the red furnace fires of the whole earth; raising monstrous towers of steel and stone; speeding a million trains through the night; vibrating the wires that enmesh the world. Their intricate, ordered groupings she could see, their spokesmen—strategists around green baize,—bending over maps and charts and lines; a pin thrust here, through a small, remote Southern town where a little telephone girl was to lose her job without just cause, and thereby set the whole stupendous machine in motion—the "exciters" first, of town and state, and next, if need be, the great drive wheel of national unity. Only it was a machine not made of cold hard metal but of millions of warm, fused human bodies, selflessly

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yielding to the mass—losing themselves to save all.

"I—see," Nancy said a second time, more slowly still. "I will do what I can when the time comes, V. A."

"Good girl," Craig smiled. "Knew you would all the time, though." And he left her.

Nancy always remembered that strike, afterwards, in a series of vivid vignettes. There was one of Pearl Garrity—red-haired, sharp-tongued, the leader among the telephone girls, who had been elected president of the new "local,"—Union 71—sitting by Nancy's side on a big packing box up in Craig's workroom, swinging her heels and commenting upon a speech of her "boss."

"'Ungrateful,' is it? Ought to be singin' the Doxology over my little six-fifty a week, so I ought, when it costs me near thirteen to live, countin' everything, and my little brothers have to quit school and go to work to make up the difference. Don't 'appreciate' my 'advantages,' neither! My God, I can't eat a victrola and wear a rest-room, you know."

There were several of Mr. Richard Payne—one standing up in a hemming and hawing Board meeting of the Welfare Association, from which the mainstays were unfortunately absent, Nancy having just submitted to the Board her statement, as Labor Inspector, prepared at the request of the newspapers, that had for it's "lead" the Telephone Company's wage scale: \$5.00 for the first six

months for student operators, \$6.00 for the next six months afterwards, \$6.50 for the succeeding year, and so forth. He was saying: "The facts are correct, Miss Nancy? You are quite sure of them?" And when she produced further evidences gleaned: "Then I see no manly or Christian reason why we should not give you the permission to publish this statement, and, moreover, stand squarely behind these girls, explaining to the town in these and other ways our reasons for so doing." The article had gone in.

There was another picture of him—a stirring one—waving his long arms in his pulpit and shouting, in his old-fashioned but righteously wrathful ministerial manner: "Open your eyes and see what's going on around you, you comfortable Christians, asleep in Zion! Last night your sons went 'down the line' in the Red Light District and other people's lost daughters sunk a little deeper into the fires of a living hell.

"Before your very noses corporations can undercut state laws and underpay their workers. Whose fault is it? What are you going to do about it all? It's your job—and mine!"

There was, for remembering, the look on V. A. Craig's face the day he told her that Pearl Garrity and Josephine Ward, the latter a Telephone Company employee of five years' standing, had been dismissed for "inefficiency," stupidly enough only four days after their election as president and secretary of the new union.

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"The girls will walk out in a body at noon, tomorrow," he said, "if the reinstatement request now in the company's hands is rejected. And then the linemen will go; then the street-car men, if the company still holds out. The telephone bells will forget how to ring and people will walk, for their health. And then the electrical workers—to a man—and, with them every light in this town goes dark. And if *that* don't fetch 'em, we'll shut down the Shops and see what happens then." His voice altered. "Poor public! Shame—when you think of it. But it's the only way we've got, so far, to wake 'em up to responsibility for the policies of their corporations. A crude enough way, I grant you, but its sorter crude, too, to starve your workers—unintelligent, you know."

He smiled, without mirth. "Watch 'em, though! When the shoe begins to pinch they'll throw it at *us*, which is natural, maybe; and then the militants in our own ranks will start throwin' things at us, too—if they don't do worse—from the *other* side of the fence, because we're not violent *enough* to suit *them*; and of course the company'll let fly all *they've* got—and, oh, we're just goin' to have a hell of a good time! Believe *me*," with a wry grin, "labor leaders are like that policeman—'their lot is not a happy one.' And Lord knows, *we've* got no love for strikes. But—well—somebody has to stand the gaff, in any reform."

He added, "Not that we're always right. I'm not claimin' that—just that we try to be.

But, lemme tell *you*: this time we *are* right and if it's fight we have to—why, *fight we will!*" His mouth closed with the grimness of a steel trap.

Nancy, half hearing, had been watching his face—a face she had never seen before—a drawn, strained sketch in black and white that might have been called "Invincibility," or, even, "Martyrdom." His will cut the air cleanly with the whish of a thin steel sword. Nothing could stand against a force like that—nothing.

Soon, one morning, half the town looked ludicrously at the other half, asking, "What in the devil are we going to *do*?" The telephones were dead wooden battery boxes on the walls and the street cars gathered dust in the car-barns. Enterprising bicylists dashed hither and yon, with futile piles of notes, and business men paced their offices, swearing at the Telephone Company, organized labor, and the distracted Chamber of Commerce and city officials impartially. A Federal mediator was to come—and didn't. One day arbitration was in plain sight, the next the company had refused the Trades Council's obviously fair proposal and arbitration was all off—blown sky high. The temperature of every man in the town, except possibly V. A. Craig, who was quite calmly in control of the situation, with a half dozen domestic and foreign attorneys at his heels, and, in addition, all the newspaper reporters, who were enjoying life to the full, went over fever heat and kept on ascending.

But, another day, there was a word in the fevered air that chilled it somewhat—"strike breakers." There was always, of course, a fresh and daily crop of startling rumors, but this one seemed to be authentic. The local assisting attorney for the Telephone Company had himself told the Chamber of Commerce secretary that "special" operators were on the way from Texas.

And, that night, when the Texas train did actually bring in the group of apprehensive girls who were hustled to prepared suites in the best hotel in closed taxis, they drove to their destination through the black streets of a "dark" town. The power house crew had walked out at four. And all the grocery stores had signs up saying: "Sold Out of Candles."

Of that whole latter period Nancy remembered chiefly the good and sufficient summary of it delivered to her and Mrs. Burns by Carl Billings, the assistant editor of the Carrollton *Daily Post*, from the top of their office table, whence his long tweed legs dangled nonchalantly.

"Always *have* wanted to see a riot," he said. "Just missed a pippin once, in Pennsylvania," disgustedly. "The real thing. I would, you know!"

"Well! When the lights went out the other night, and the Texas Flyer pulled in, I thinks, thinks I, 'Ah! a riot before mornin' or my name's Abraham!'"

"So I gird up my loins—which is biblical for stowin' away a Colt automatic and my pocket

flash—and I sail down to the hotel ready for battle, murder, and sudden death—of the *other* parties, you understand.” He paused and leisurely lit a cigarette, to the exasperation of his intent audience.

“Dark house at the hotel,” he resumed, puffing away. “Few candles stuck around in the gloom, but the whole lookin’ as excitin’ as a wake minus refreshments. I stuck around, though, like the candles—hope springin’ eternal in my breast—and pretty soon here came the Texas beauty show down for dinner—very late, 8:15—Sayres, himself” (the district superintendent), “and Williams” (the manager of the local telephone plant), “and another fellow I didn’t know, bein’ among those present. They didn’t look specially happy—any of ’em. In fact, they carried out my wake idea perfectly.”

He hoisted one long leg into an inverted V on the table, settled back, loosely, and proceeded:

“I don’t think the Texas outfit ate much dinner because people began to seep into the lobby while they were in the dinin’ room and flatten their noses against a glass side of it to look at ’em.” He laughed. “You’d have thought the crowd was expectin’ to hear ’em roar or leap for their beef-steak or somethin’, the way they stared in.

“The desk clerk got flurried and he couldn’t locate the manager, and that worried him some more. He suggested that the crowd go on outside, but the idea didn’t seem to meet with popular approval. Then he rang all the bells around the

place and a cordon of gallant nigger bellboys cleared a path to the dinin'-room doors.

"The Lone Star delegation emerges—very dignified and white around the gills, with Wilson fore and Sayres aft sputterin' about 'this perfect outrage,' et ceteray, but makin' remarkable progress to the freight elevator I note. Somebody hissed as they piled in in haste and in a minute the crowd was ugly, likewise increasin' in volume as well as noise, every second.

"The manager shoved through it right about then, stood up on the desk and made 'em one of those tactful, ingratiatin', would-be persuasive speeches—you know the kind—that's enough to make a sane man mad—much less a mob.

"'Aw—cut it!' somebody yelled. 'You took in scabs—whad dye got ter say ter *that*?'"

"He opened his mouth with the idea of sayin' *somehthin*', evidently, but there was a howl from the crowd—groans and hisses and general uncomplimentary remarks mixed in.

"'Get that freight elevator down here!' one big fellow hollered. 'Where's your stairs?' another one yelped."

He interrupted himself:

"I give you my word, ladies, I didn't know more'n two or three men there. I never saw that riff-raff before. They weren't union fellows—I know most of them. Where under heaven they all came from——

"Well! First thing I knew, there was a surge of

that mob that flung me smack into a cold marble column—made *no* impression on the column however, to my surprise!" His hearers chuckled. "And the next thing I knew V. A. Craig had gone past me like jagged lightnin', simply tearin' people out of his way with both hands.

"He got up on the counter and then he just stood there a minute, restin' easy, and lookin' 'em over with a smile that would of withered a pine tree where it grew."

Nancy's eyes kindled. She sat forward, fascinated.

"I eased around," he continued, "and maneuvered my hand between my ribs and the man's next to me in the direction of my pad and fountain pen, so's to take him down, and the darn thing dropped on the tilin', of course. Sounded like a rifle crack in the quiet.

"'You're a pretty lot,' V. A. says to 'em in a minute, still lookin' disgusted. 'What's the big idea? Goin' to drag a bunch of poor, fool women that were bamboozled into comin' here out of their bedrooms and drop 'em down the elevator shaft, I suppose? Fine! Worthy of the best traditions of Southern manhood!'

"Nobody makes a sound.

"'You're the kind,' he goes on, shakin' his open hand at 'em, 'that lose us strikes and kill movements and set the country against us. But you ain't goin' to lose us this one! Beat it out o' here, now, and *stay* out! I came down here to tell those

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girls to go back to Texas, where they belong, and they'll go, all right—without any assistance from the likes of *you*.

“‘Beat it, now,’ he says, kinder impatient, ‘and be careful of those doors,’ and he climbs down calmly on the inside, turns his back and starts conversin’ with the manager, but watchin’ the crowd through the back of his head, I knew.

“Well, ladies, they filed out of that place like little lambs, though you may not believe it. And when they were all gone V. A. and the manager yelled up the shaft for the freight elevator and a little nigger brings it down in jerks, havin’ chills with his teeth.

“‘Stay down here, if you don’t mind, Carl,’ V. A. asked me, so of course I had to.”

He suppressed a laugh and went on:

“In about half an hour they came down again. And V. A. was laughin’ so hard he was leanin’ against the side of the elevator—weak. They had looked everywhere on four floors, except under the carpets, and there was no hair nor hairpin of that Texas beauty show to be found! Nor yet their stalwart protectors! An open exit door by a rear fire escape was the answer. That and the night clerk at the railway station where we went next. He had sold a bunch of gibberin’ female maniacs through tickets to Fort Worth ’bout an hour and a half before and the train had pulled out just forty-five minutes later!”

So died the telephone strike, in a burst of laughter

that shook the town. The company might weather strikes and abuse and darkness, but not ridicule—deep and city-wide.

Within the week the duly recognized members of Local 71, N. A. T. O., headed by Misses Garrity and Ward, returned sedately to work and the town talked, rode, and had its being once more.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTERMATH

FOR Nancy, the telephone strike had aftermaths. One was Margery Sloan, one was a warm resolution of thanks by the Trades Council and pledge of support "in any legislative work that may be undertaken," and one was a sheaf of letters: from the Telephone Company, from their local attorney, from the manager's brother-in-law, and from a few other citizens—designated by Nancy as "miscellaneous Bourbons"—withdrawing their subscriptions to the Public Welfare Association. The withdrawals were accompanied by more or less stinging comment upon its "sensational espousal, through press and pulpit, of the cause of a dangerous and non-representative minority," as one imposing paragraphist put it.

Nancy, reading this letter aloud to Mrs. Burns with deep, oratorical *empressement*, chuckled, impudently, at the end of it and tossed it airily into the wastebasket.

"Me," she said. "I like minorities! I've had a sneaking fondness for 'em all my life. And, do you know, Molly, one day I found out that Bob was just as bad? He admitted that whenever a lot

of people all began to jump on one man, or organization, or movement, right then he sat up and got interested. Generally lost no time tracking the victims to their lair to take a look at 'em. It's not any noble idea of befriending the under dog, either. We just figure that any persons or movements that have enough dynamite in 'em to frighten large majorities into hysterics must be *some* Persons and Movements! See?"

"Your logic is excellent, my dear, but"—shuddering—"your English is unspeakable—or rather it ought to be," Mrs. Burns rejoined, repressing a smile and shaking her head sadly over the degeneration of a Bachelor of Arts. "And," sternly, "you said 'damn' three times yesterday, Nancy!"

"I won't to-day," promised Nancy solemnly, with the guilty air of a spanked small child. "Anyway"—and she turned toward the open window,— "the sun is shining and spring is here, Molly O!"

Perhaps her sequence was not clear, but the lyrical lilt in her voice was. And it was at this moment that the shadow of Margery Sloan first fell across the spring sunlight flooding Nancy's heart.

The telephone rang and she answered. Pearl Garrity's quick, sharp-edged Irish voice said: "Miss Nancy? You got time to come 'round to Wheeler's" (a near-by soda fountain) "and talk to me 'bout three minutes? I'm off duty for fifteen."

It was as V. A. Craig had said. Not one of the telephone girls, although they were all Nancy's

devoted friends and admirers by now, could be induced to enter the Court House door. By evasion or excuse they fled it. If she saw them it was elsewhere. She put on her hat resignedly now and proceeded around the block to the soda fountain.

When they were seated Pearl leaned across the marble-topped table, her "coke" pushed aside, and talked warily—one eye on near-by tables—but with a rapid intensity.

"Can you do somethin'," she began, "as just Miss Nancy Carroll—plain—without any public welfare in it, or do they all have to be cases?" She was entirely earnest and guiltless of evil intent, thereby redoubling the force of her thrust. Nancy recovered somewhat.

"I'll do it plain, Pearl," she agreed, meekly.

Pearl was obviously relieved. "Well, it's Margery Sloan. You remember her, dontcher?"

Nancy nodded emphatically. She had done little else but "remember her" for a half hour after she had first seen her in, but not of, a group of excited, vociferous girls up in the Trades Council office, each determined that her plan of action should be at least heard, and at once. This girl, Margery, sat by a window looking, now listlessly out of it, now with an unmistakable weary amusement, at the feverish group. She was not more than eighteen, of a physical type in no wise distinguishable from those of the others, except, perhaps, that she was a little paler, sallower, more untidy, too, with a sort of don't-care, slumping

untidiness which was the antithesis of Pearl's crisp attire and the meretricious, dashing smartness of some of the other girls.

It was her expression that arrested. What right had a little eighteen-year-old telephone girl to cynicism? It was one thing for the Adrian Harleys, and the Anatole Frances, too, to see life as a "supreme ironic procession"—somehow one always thought of the mental Peerage as possessing a natural monopoly of that godlike privilege—sardonic laughter—but it was quite another thing for this cheap child. And yet why not? Who with as much uncultivated ground for cynicism as the very poor?

Pearl's sharp voice recalled Nancy from her second inward excursion on Margery Sloan's account.

"There's somethin' wrong—and *I* can't dope it out. Mebbe you can. She's just gone dead on her job, lately—got no more interest in it or anything else. Moons around the place, slappin' at her work, half-hearted—and just sort o' laughs to herself when the supervisors bawl her out. I'm expectin her to be fired any minute.

"I ast her if she was sick, yestiddy—I was sittin' next at the board—and she flared up at me like a gas-jet. Says, 'What's it to you?'

"*'Not-uh-damn-thing!'* says I, back—which I shouldn't, but I was hot, and then, Miss Nancy, she smiled real sweet, like she used to, and slipped her arms around my shoulders a minute and then

stalks out o' the room, for a drink, she says. After she come back I sneaked a look over at her again." Pearl paused, and went on slowly: "I give you my word, Miss Nancy, I've never seen such a face on a human!" She shook her head, her lips in a hard line. "Margery was either bein' eat up alive by a pain or hell-fire had her—one or the other. I never *did* see anybody look like that. Nev—er!"

"'My God, dearie,' I says to her under my breath—couldn't help it. 'What's wrong?'"

"And she sort o' come back—slow—from a place ten hundred miles away, and looked at me—blank—and then shook her head hard, two or three times and says 'Oh! nothin', nothin', '—breathin' quick—and went to work pullin' the plugs in and out like mad, mutterin' somethin'.

"Right then and there I says to myself, 'Pearl, this is out o' yo' class, dearie—better give Miss Nancy the S. O. S.' So I'm doin' it now."

"Tell me everything you know about her," prompted Nancy, much concerned.

There was a mother, it appeared, a widow. Her husband had been a drunkard and a "bad lot," "gone" on women, and with the wanderlust, too; would just leave home every now and then—sometimes not for two years at a stretch, though—and come back ragged and morose, but sober. He never told where he went and what he did.

Pearl's mother had been a neighbor for some years. All the neighbors were pleased when he died. Mrs. Sloan Pearl had "precious little use for."

"She got sanctified, recent," Pearl related sarcastically, "at some protracted Holiness meetin's goin' on in a tent on the edge o' town," and, subsequently, Mrs. Sloan, it seems, "prissed around superior like," in her neighborhood, wearing her new religion like a new silk dress. She and Margery never had gotten along well. Mrs. Sloan had always thrown it up to the latter that she had "too much o' her father in her" to suit *her*. They were "gettin' on worse'n ever, now, with Mrs. Sloan always 'preachin' and prayin' over Margery," Pearl "reckoned." Margery now did most of the work around the place after hours, "tended to" four younger children, and turned in her seven dollars per week besides.

"But," said Pearl, bewilderment closing over her again, "she's never seemed to *mind*! She's different from us, anyway—quiet kind, you know—never has liked fellows, don't know how to dance, don't know how to dress, don't care—seems. And now, all of a sudden, in the last three months she's—well, she's just somebody else, that's all. Margery's gone. I never saw *this* girl, before."

"How was she before she changed?"

"Sweet as a daisy. Gentle and nice. Everybody loved her, even her mother, for all their fightin'."

"What's your theory?"

"If I had one I wouldn't be here. I'd be trailin' it."

"Have any of the girls got one?"

"No. Oh! well," indulgently, "Jo Ward swears there's a man in it. Jo's man crazy though. She swears up and down she saw a fellow on the Sloan's porch one night in the dark, and could see Margery with a long coat on standin' by him but couldn't make him out. There's no street light near their house. And she says another time up on the levee——

"Oh! Gosh!" suddenly, with a glance at a wall clock and a grab for the soda checks, forestalling Nancy. Outside she said urgently, gripping Nancy's arm. "*Do* somethin', Miss Nancy, will you?" and fled.

Now to "do something" was the prime principle of Nancy's nature, so she took Margery on with zeal, albeit a zeal tempered by strategy and extreme preoccupation with other matters.

There was Protheroe, who had been incredibly surly and uncoöperative ever since his defeat in the matter of the petition for a special school district, by means of a counter petition.

Another strand of importance in her tangle was contained in a neat folder lettered "State Conditions." Her questionnaire to social workers and others had gathered a shock of varied and disturbing comment from all over the State. One woman wrote: "We have a city jail beside which the Black Hole of Calcutta would be spacious and sanitary."

Dotted here and there over the landscape, it appeared, were disgraceful convict camps and poor

houses, to offset a model plant or two, described. Juvenile Courts and modern charitable agencies, except in a few of the largest cities, were conspicuous by their absence. The words "need for some state or county agency to develop and supervise" occurred frequently in the letters.

Nancy was plugging away at a paper that was to bring the members of the State Social Workers Conference to their feet in horror and amazement, in May. It was all most absorbing, but new cases kept thoughtlessly pouring in, to interfere, and now here was Margery Sloan, who was supposed to be urgent.

Nancy got hold of Margery in odd times and divers and devious ways. One time Pearl and Margery came to her house for Sunday night supper and Pearl had a "date" afterwards and was "obliged" to leave.

Margery behaved very nicely. She was silent, but polite, as was not always the case with her now. She wandered about, quietly, looking at things, after supper, as the others talked. Nancy saw her touch the brass sconces and a great jar of bayberries lightly, as she stood regarding them. A Japanese print she shook her head at, slowly. She and herself were apparently having a rather nice time of it. But, her solitary tour of inspection made, she lapsed into a dull taciturnity again and could not be persuaded to stay long after Pearl left.

"A peculiar child," Miss Lætitia remarked afterwards. "Nice, quiet little thing, though," hastily.

Miss Lætitia tried never to speak ill of any creature. "But not like Alice," she added.

Alice Madden and Miss Lætitia had become devoted friends on sight. The shy, lovely, beauty-starved child, and the equally shy, beauty-loving little gentlewoman had chimed together with a quaint and delicate harmony that no disparity of social state could mar. Alice, in her few days in the Carroll home before starting in at the High School, and her visits later, had been insatiate for the tales and tokens of Miss Lætitia's youth, while Margery had seemed to restrain impatience at the little lady's slight and sporadic anecdotal tendency.

Some time after this Nancy, in her Margery hunt, got into the Sloan's house, "by mistake," looking for another place, and consented to sit down and talk for quite a while. Still another time there was a long Sunday automobile ride in a friend's touring car, and she and Margery, courteous if monosyllabic, "happened" to be paired on the back seat. And so it came about at last, one afternoon, that the two sat across a table from each other in the empty office adjoining Nancy's. Margery, unlike the other girls, had made no objection to coming. Appearances, conventions, embarrassments, apparently were not even words to her—they merely were not. She was said to have always been a *gauche*, awkward, ill-at-ease girl. She was none of those things. She was sometimes courteously but oftener quite rudely and abruptly one's equal, or detached, suspicious superior.

Nancy looked across at her thoughtfully, now, where she sat, gazing indifferently out of a window, waiting for her to state her business. But, quite suddenly, something in the dreary, sagging slump of the girl's body in the chair—something hopeless and dead-tired and desolate, smote Nancy into a quivering rush of pity. Margery *wasn't* "quarry," or "problem," or "case," or anything else, but just another girl in trouble. She leaned forward.

"The first thing I want to say to you, Margery," she began, looking very straight into the latter's rather hard, searching eyes, "is that I've been deliberately following you and getting acquainted because I could see that something was very much wrong and I wanted to find out if I couldn't help make it right."

"I know all that," said Margery, surprisingly. "What I don't know is why you've done it. Did Pearl ask you to?"

"Oh!" Nancy evaded. "Why won't you believe that I really want to help, myself?"

"Pearl did ask you," Margery stated, and again looked out of the window into a far, hazy, country across the river from her.

"Honey," said Nancy, simply. "I s'pose you think that because I have a lovely old house and a County job I'm very self-satisfied and contented and don't know what trouble is. But it's not so. I've never had a mother and I've needed and wanted mine all my life. I think of her all the time, though there's no use talking. And I'm not happy

—really and truly—in my heart. I would bother and worry about a lot of things if I ever stopped rushing around long enough. I don't know what's wrong with you, but if you'd tell me I think I might understand."

Margery turned and stared into Nancy's face for a long minute, with a sort of straining misery in her own and then she crumpled forward upon the table, sobbing brokenly. Nancy moved swiftly to her side, then, with an arm across her shoulders, waited, her face brooding and gentle.

And, after all, it was a sordid and common enough little tale. Its significance lay in what it implied, not what it told. There was a boy—his name she never gave Nancy—and he was the first boy who had ever noticed her, in her life. She met him at a church social and he walked home with her. And then they went walking Sundays, on the levee and out on the pikes, and she saw that he pulled his cap low when they passed people and never wanted to stop in any of the girls' houses, but she paid no attention to it. Her mother didn't like him, but she was happy—proud, too, to be "somebody" at last. She would lie awake hours and think how wonderful it would be to be married and get away from that "Number, please" all day long—and of course she did love her family, but they took such a lot of looking after, with the washing and ironing and scrubbing and everything. She just felt tired all the time—woke up tired, fell on the bed worn out, at nights.

But after she knew him she quit being tired, didn't mind doing anything in the world, any more, because she was thinking all the time, inside, how wonderful everything was going to be! She was crazy about him, of course. He was "awful fascinatin'"—bitterly.

She started a linen chest, well—that is, she got Jo Ward to show her how to cross-stitch two towels. But he "kept tellin' her not to say a word about him going with her"—to let it be "their" secret, so 'course she didn't tell a soul.

She thought it was funny he never took her to a picture show—or anything, but he said, one day, he was saving his money to get married, and kissed her. And then, that night, he came to the house and they went for a walk on the levee and she didn't think how late it was getting—and he began—began——

She hid her shamed face.

It just "sorter knocked her crazy" for a minute, because she'd been thinking he was so fine and good—"savin' his money, steady, and bein' so sweet" to her "an' all." He had seemed—shyly—a kind of—of knight to come and rescue her from slavery, "like in the fairy tales, you know," and then—to have him do *that*! She kinder went to pieces for a few minutes, she reckoned, and finally straightened up and told him, nice as she could, how disappointed she was in him—but she did love him and if he'd never, never say or think such a thing about her again she'd try to forgive him.

"And, oh! God! Miss Nancy, he *laughed!* Called me a little fool, and asked me what I thought he was goin' with a wallflower like me, for. Oh! he said awful things to me, Miss Nancy, and he told me he was engaged to another girl and *that's* what he was savin' the money for—not for me—not for me at all." Margery, her burning face down upon her arms, shaken with a terrible crying, writhed and twisted her hands together.

"Oh!" Nancy cried indignantly. "The vile insult of it! To a decent girl—" and her arm tightened supportingly.

Margery raised her head, at that, in a kind of woeful surprise. "But it wasn't that," she said, "near as much as it was to think that *that* was all he wanted of me. When I loved him so!" Down went the sodden head again.

Her gasping, whispered words came muffled and choked with tears, between long sobbing breaths. "Nothing to live for now. He'll never come back. He never *will* marry me. Oh! my God!" Her hands clenched. "And I love him still. *Nothing* to live for."

In her passionate, self-centered absorption in the one great event of her existence she had thrown to the winds the lesser things—reticence and self-regarding pride. Nancy sat there, rather appalled. It was no child's grief, this. There were years behind it to make it the cumulative, devastating thing it was. What under Heaven should she say or do?

Margery sobbed on, desolately, whispering the same things over and over.

Nancy, with a sudden mental influx of energy and decision, thought: "What this child needs is a good, bracing dose of common sense, to shock her awake. Once inject a little saving humor into the situation——"

Aloud she said, in gentle raillery: "Margery, dear, listen to me. Are you listening?" The abject head nodded, slightly, "I don't suppose you know it, sweetheart, but you're just the finest kind of girl there is—you'd make *any* man a wonderful wife, any children a splendid mother. It's plain foolish to let this one unworthy man spoil the thought of marriage for you. As if no other man would marry you, simply because this one happened to be a cad!" Margery's head came up with a jerk. "Have a little common sense, dear child. He's not the only man in the world. There are many, many others—heaps decenter—whom you can know right here, if you'd get out more. And Pearl and I would see to that, oh! so gladly." Margery was staring into her face with a strange, stunned look.

"You must brace up, Margery," Nancy continued vehemently, "and have some spunk. Why! are you going to let just one insignificant man out of a whole world-full, who doesn't care for you as you do for him, and who is not fit to tie your shoe-laces, besides, upset your whole life? Absurd, Margery dear, you must——" She stopped,

all at once, startled before the blaze in Margery's pallid face and wet, furious eyes.

"You shall not talk about him like that!" she said, breathing gustily and fast. "He is good, too, besides the bad. You don't know, you never saw him. Oh!" she accused, in a very bitter despair. "You *said* you'd understand and you don't—you don't—not anything."

She stumbled up from her seat and blindly stooped for her hat on a chair near by. Nancy sprang to her feet, with pleadings, but Margery, moving to the window, turned her back and stared out over the river in a still, stony immobility, while Nancy spoke. After a time she peered into the mirror of her cheap, red leatherette handbag and powdered her face with a shaking hand. Nancy might have been a chair or table behind her. When she had finished she nodded vaguely in Nancy's direction and walked evenly out of the room. If she heard the latter's last words to her she gave no evidence of it.

It took the golden shine and freshness of an April morning, on the next day, which was Sunday, to still the biting, buzzing questions in the darkness of Nancy's perplexed brain. To be sure she had, in a vague uneasiness, gotten Bob to drive her past the Sloan's at supper time and had found Margery, to her intense surprise, smiling and pleasant. She seemed still a little agitated, nervous, but her pleasure at something or other was evident.

"Perhaps I didn't blunder so much with her,

after all," Nancy had thought, a trifle relieved. But she tossed restlessly until late at night, thinking. When she waked, however, to rain-wet, gleaming beauty and fragrance, and the chirpings of many irresponsible little birds, fluttering about outside in the magnolias, delight entered into all her doors, unbidden.

Margery, Pearl Garrity told her over the telephone, had taken her little brothers and sisters to Sunday School. "Passed here and hollered in to us like old times," said Pearl. "You must 'a done her good some way, Miss Nancy."

And Nancy, pleased, decided that she "must 'a," too, and rang up Bob to tell him that Margery couldn't be found to go for the drive into the country they had planned, but that Miss Carroll *could*, and, moreover, that the said lady felt recklessly like putting up a picnic lunch and making a day of it, provided he did. He most positively did and arrived shortly, laden with fruit and drinkables.

"Oh, Mercy!" Nancy laughed, packing away lunch alongside, "this would feed the New York Police force! But I'll tell you!" delightedly, "let's go get my beloved little Tad Crawford"—(he of the romantic tendencies in fiction) "instead of Margery. He's a precious lamb, Bob, you'll love him, and he knows all the roads we don't."

An hour later they stowed a flushed, shining-eyed, preternaturally clean and starched small boy of nine between them on the broad car seat and fared gaily forth.

"Another half hour and I'd 'a' been at church!" said Tad, in the tone of one who thanks Providence for a miraculous escape.

Bob shouted, and Tad looked up at him in amiable surprise, a tentative smile in wide brown eyes and parted lips.

He hung over the steering gear in absorption. "Works different from a Ford," he observed, reflectively. "I have rode in a Ford."

On the pike he pulled Nancy's head down to whisper: "Would you mind if we went real fast, just a little minute? You ast him, won't you?" And when the car shot forward he sat up very straight, obviously tense with excitement, laughing in little gleeful gasps, every now and then, and whirling around to smile up eagerly into Nancy's face.

They had a beautiful time. On the way home Nancy saw the "prettiest dog-wood boughs yet," so the entire party detoured. But alack! they were too high, even for Bob. Forked sticks and all other means proved futile.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Tad, suddenly, and the next moment was half way up the tree.

"Oh! Tad, your Sunday suit!" Nancy wailed, but he only chuckled impishly and "shinnied" higher.

Homeward bound, he leaned tiredly back against Nancy, and gazed upward.

"Oh! look!" he said dreamily, "the clouds are all in a hurry 'bout somethin', and the buzzards—see em?—they're a-sailin' round an' round—havin' a play party."

Nancy dropped a kiss on his tousled sunny hair. In a short while he was asleep, his warm little body sagging against her, his head in the bend of her shoulder. She looked down at him—long lashes brushing the curving cheeks—red lips parted. The dear, tired, blessed little boy!

A queer new idea came to her and she held him closer. Suppose this was her own little son, here in the hollow of her arm! It was a wonderful thought—made her feel all trembling. She glanced at Bob, suddenly. He was looking straight ahead, his fine, brown face in profile. Suppose, too, that Bob was— He turned and looked at her then, smiling directly into her eyes, with a deep light in his own, unmistakably meeting her, in complete comprehension of her thoughts, on her hill top. A hot wave of color flooded Nancy's face and she dropped her cheek upon Tad's curly head.

At her own gate, about five, Nancy, to her surprise, saw Molly Burns on her verandah, alone. She and Bob went in together. Mrs. Burns rose. Her face was very grave. "I've been waiting for you, Nancy," she said, "with mighty bad news—It's about Margery Sloan."

The vague uneasiness swept back over Nancy like a dark flood tide. "What—oh! what?" she could barely manage the words.

"Sit down, dear." Mrs. Burns motioned to the steps, and Nancy sank down bewilderedly. "She's—drowned herself, Nancy, in the river."

Nancy gave a sharp cry and hid her face with her

arms. "No—no!" She looked up in frightened pleading. "It can't be, so *soon*! Not—not dead? Say not, Molly. Oh! Molly!"

Mrs. Burns sat down swiftly beside her, and put a steadying arm around her shoulders.

"It's only too true, Nancy girl. I've just seen her, at the undertaker's place. They found the body some hours ago. Three doctors have done everything in their power—pulmotor, everything—but it was too late. She must have done it this morning some time, after she left the children at church. Pearl Garrity passed her a few blocks away from it. Said she was smiling to herself and humming a little tune, walking along briskly, swinging a straw hat of hers by a ribbon that was on it." Nancy drew in a quivering breath and covered her face again. "Oh! I'm so sorry, so sorry, dear child." Mrs. Burns drew Nancy's head to her bosom and soothed her gently, mother-wise, but Nancy pushed wildly away.

"No," she said, "don't be sorry for *me*. I *did* it. Be sorry for her. She came to me for help and understanding and she didn't get it. So there was no one—no one else, and she did—this. Oh! I can't bear it. I can't bear it. Off on a picnic like a shallow fool and Margery in the river. Oh!" She clenched her hands tight at her head in a gesture of utter torment and pushed her hair back, hard.

Mrs. Burns and Bob spoke simultaneously: "Nonsense, Nancy!"

"The poor little girl was not in her right mind," Mrs. Burns added, with emphasis. "Everything shows it."

Bob got up. "I'm going down there and find out all I can. There was nothing else of significance beyond what you told me, Nancy?"

She shook her head dully. She had hoped to persuade Margery to go with her to Bob's office, Monday, for a general looking over, so had told him about her in advance.

"I'll be back later," Bob said. He glanced at Nancy again, who was staring, unheeding, at the steps under her feet. "Stay here, Mrs. Burns, will you?"

She nodded and he strode rapidly out to his car.

He did not return for several hours. He had gone at the matter with his customary thoroughness. "I'm no sort of an alienist," he began frowning. "And there's none in the town. MacLean" (one of the doctors who had been called) "has been hipped on psychiatry for some time—got a lot of stuff on it—doesn't know much more than the rest of us, though. But he was interested and we went into things as best we could. Had your story, Nancy, got Mrs. Sloan's and the Garrity girl's, made an examination, checked up on the symptoms, and so on. I had a sort of idea—haven't lost it yet—that the child might have met that damned fellow this morning, by appointment. We thought she was pleased over something last night—remember? And she seemed so to the Garrity girl.

She might have thought he'd come around, and then, in the distress of finding he hadn't, done the thing, on the impulse, you know. But I couldn't get a shred of evidence to support my theory.

"MacLean thinks it's a plain case of what's known as manic-depressive insanity, a form of melancholia—periods of depression, followed by excitement or elation, frequently takes a suicidal bent. She was obviously in an abnormal mental state. And then there's what looks like hereditary predisposition—the father, you know—alcoholism, his frequent peculiar lapses, at the times when he left home and wandered about, and so on. Insanity's highly probable there. There's hereditary predisposition in fifty per cent of such cases, you see. But I don't know about all that. I can't seem——"

Mrs. Burns had been trying anxiously to attract his attention. As he looked at her now she frowned, glanced at Nancy, and laid a warning finger upon her lips.

Kicking himself mentally for a fool to have forgotten about Nancy's father, Bob hastily changed the subject. But Nancy, startled, had seen and understood.

He told them briefly, then, how he had found Mrs. Sloan secretly guarding from everyone the fact of Margery's acquaintance with the—to others—unknown boy. But he had probed and found her certain of the girl's guilt and cursing the man "responsible," to be spared only that "disgrace" for her other children might be avoided.

Nancy stirred restlessly. "You told her what Margery said? You convinced her?"

He nodded, somewhat grimly. "I told her several things," adding: "Poor woman."

And then there was a silence. There appeared to be nothing more to say.

Silence seemed to follow Nancy about, engulfing her, for the next few days. She moved around hearing people's voices faintly, as if coming from a great distance, through silence. The funeral service, the weeping of the women and children, all far off and faint. Only Bob, at her side, seemed real, a rock in a weary land.

Coming back to the rather chilly twilight of her living room after the funeral, she sat down, exhausted, in a chair before a flickering fire and closed her eyes. After a time, opening them, she saw a letter on the mantel shelf, addressed in Avery Standish's familiar hand.

She regarded it somberly. It would be full of cleverness and art exhibitions and charming love-making, with just the right note of passionate sincerity in just the right spot. A sense of the fearful contrasts of life smote her. Marjorie lay dead for lack of love, and she—being offered it—could achieve no feeling above a sick boredom. Oh, the irony of life!

She stood up, took the letter and tearing it slowly into small bits dropped them flutteringly into the blaze. A number of other things burned with them.

CHAPTER XV

SLOUGH OF DESPOND

A HAZE of thought settled upon Nancy in the weeks that followed. Mrs. Burns welcomed the May meeting of the State Social Worker's Conference as a call to action that might rouse her. And, with relief, she packed the latter off to the sessions at Big Bend, following her two days later.

She found the younger and the more radical element of the Conference in battle formation behind Nancy. The membership had split, after the reading of her paper, on her flat issue of the appointment of a legislative committee.

First on the new committee's order of business was to be the drafting of a sweeping, statewide bill creating a state "Public Welfare Commission," with supervision of charitable and penal affairs, and abolishing, by one of its provisions, the convict lease system and the practice of leasing paupers as well. The old heads of the Conference were making a "Custer's Last Rally" stand, planted firmly on the constitution and by-laws. They pointed out with heat, eloquence, and some asperity that the purpose of a conference was to confer, that political action was specifically forbidden.

But Nancy had struck fire in the flint with hard facts, and the blaze was sweeping merrily through the entire gathering.

She went home a member of the legislative committee for which she had done battle, the chairman being a rotund, jolly, keen-minded little doctor of Big Bend, by name Gunnell.

He and Nancy made plans to gather, before October, from every significant State in the Union not already covered by her, and from every person of especial note in their own State, material which they would embody in an epochal measure that was to go thundering down the corridors of State history, flattening out inconsequential obstructions like Jim Protheroe as it went!

When, by the way, Nancy told V. A. Craig all this, later, he was in one of his cryptic, exasperating moods, and his imperviousness to enthusiasm and oracular comments annoyed her greatly.

"Dream on," he said, looking bored. "But remember this: day dreamin' is not one of Jim Protheroe's pastimes."

And she couldn't get another word out of him.

On the train with Molly Burns, returning from Big Bend, Nancy was still full of Conference impressions and projects, but some ten miles out of Carrollton, she reached hastily into her bag for a letter from Avery Standish, brought up by Mrs. Burns and until that moment forgotten. Apologizing, she began it idly enough, but her lips curved into a smile, in spite of herself, as she proceeded:

"You appear to labor under the delusion," she was reading, "that you can dispose of me by the simple expedient of not answering my letters. Nothing could be further from the truth. I'm in training for the position of Job's successor. It will probably undermine my health and reason, but in that event you will be compelled to regard me as a case, which is all right—just so you regard me."

Again, "I've developed the most unaccountable longing for pine flats and the deepest interest in social uplift. For example, I'm conducting a personal investigation of the case of my butler and the maid across the way, likewise keeping Tim," (his chauffeur) "under observation as a possible psychiatric subject. That last is a matter of grave importance to me and I may, at any moment, find it imperative to seek, in person, your professional advice."

Nancy chuckled over the P. S.: "I may also wish to consult Doctor Singleton about my heart. I fear complications."

Nancy stared sideways out of the window, with laughter in her eyes, but slight dismay, too. Standish was such an obstreperous gentleman—he might prove difficult to handle. She thought about him for fully fifteen minutes, then forgot him again and lapsed into silence, her head back against the red-plush cushions, a shadow visibly blanketing her.

"Do you feel badly about anything, dear?" Mrs. Burns inquired, with intentional casualness.

And Nancy said no, that she was only a bit tired. Conventions were always a strain, she thought. And she was thereupon completely silent for the remainder of the journey, sitting beside a frowning, nonplused Mrs. Burns.

On the first of June Bob Singleton left for three months of surgical work and observation in Chicago, Rochester, and Baltimore. Bob had not been away from Carrollton for almost two years, contrary to his habit of going away to study once a year, or oftener.

"I want to break in for good, up there, some of these days, soon," he said to her. "And I don't want to feel like a side-tracked dub when I do finally land among the big ones."

He did not tell her, however, that he'd got quite as far as he thought Carrollton could take him, and was going North and East primarily to look about for openings, and secondarily to study. Bob habitually talked about things after they happened.

Nancy half promised him, when he had argued with her for some time before leaving, that she would take Miss Lætitia and go "somewhere that was cool" for August. But that was before she made her next monthly audit of their personal finances.

"Get out the ice-cream freezer, Mammy Line," she thereupon directed, resignedly. "Here's where we spend the summer."

Some motley and peculiar guests partook of its

cooling contents that blazing summer. Billy Conroy, who, without Bob, was given to lonesome Sunday-morning rambles in the woods, and Alice Madden, were the most favored and least peculiar ones. Billy was driving ahead at his job like a little steam-engine, making splendidly good.

Nancy seemed to Mrs. Burns and Miss Lætitia to be working even harder than was possible, on legislative plans and cases as well. And she seemed, too, to hate being alone and to be always trying to have a lot of people around her, even at home—principally her court wards and "charity patients." Bob had taught her how to drive his car and left instructions that she was to have it whenever she and his mother could mutually arrange, so she took rags and tags and velvet gowns indiscriminately, to drive and, occasionally, home to lunch or supper with her.

The town merely smiled affectionately when it saw Nancy in earnest converse with some scarecrow of a hobo or slatternly drab on Main Street, Nancy in railway and police stations at fearsome hours of the nights, with plain-clothes men for escorts, and Nancy speeding by with strange cargo.

Miss Lætitia was always the perfect hostess. One day Nancy came in for luncheon with a bedraggled, forlorn, but particularly outrageous-looking lady whose every tint and line shrieked of what she was, or rather of what she had been until a few weeks before. She had just been asked to leave the quiet boarding place Nancy had found

for her, because the neighbors were talking. She was in tearful distress at the slamming of this first decent door in her face, it was luncheon time, Nancy couldn't exactly dine with her in public—so here they were!

Nancy had the grace to blush slightly when little Miss Lætitia appeared, erect, immaculate in snowy lawn, looking very sweet, quaint, and spotless.

"Cousin Lætitia," she said, meeting her in advance of her guest, and speaking in an undertone, a note of apologetic appeal in her voice, "this is a friend of mine who has no place to go for luncheon, so I thought you wouldn't mind——"

Miss Lætitia took the woman's shrinking hand sedately, with a direct glance. "Any friend of Nancy's is always welcome," she said, with her kind and faintly formal courtesy. "What is your name, my dear?"

And the three had a surprisingly nice, congenial time of it at luncheon—discussing La France roses and how hard they were to grow, some new government recipes for canning fruit, and other feminine topics of deep mutual interest. Nancy suppressed a giggle at sight of Mammy Line's horror struck, tight-lipped old face, but otherwise the affair was placid and ordinary. Nancy hugged the dignified little lady hard, as they left her, later. "You're *my* idea of the real thing," she whispered to her pleased, but puzzled Cousin Lætitia.

Those women and girls from the "district" had

given Nancy much food for thought. There was a great phrase that trembled in her mind whenever she reflected upon them: "Her sins are forgiven because she hath loved much."

It was a very daring thing for the Lord to have said, she thought; a terribly radical, advanced thing. Only a tiny minority, now, after two thousand years, was bold enough to repeat it. Yet one could check and verify it, and a few of the other sayings, every day in the "district." Take this woman, an inhabitant of it for years, a "lifer," one would have said. One day she found that she loved someone, and her life was at once a horror to her. She was struggling painfully up out of it, now, via the medical and charity organization route. But any route would do. The miracle had happened.

Nancy's perfectly definite moral code for the regulation of humanity was encountering a series of rude shocks.

There were the men and boys, too. A general shudder of disgust, on her part, had always sufficed to dispose of *their* case. But, somehow, she was beginning to see that that was—well, unscientific to say the least. A remark of Bob's sometimes recurred to her. He was always saying succinct, noteworthy things. He had said, anent the subject of sex—for they discussed everything under the shining sun—"it's hardly—safe, is it, to call the motive force of the planet anything as trivial as a vice, like cigarette-smoking, for instance?" lighting his eternal cigarette, with a smile, as he spoke.

And she was seeing that. Those young, fresh-faced high-school lads—or the older ones, veiling their youth with a hastily usurped cynicism—what a dreadful pathos there was in the spectacle they made, striving against a blind, ancient force stronger than they, and ill-equipped to fight or tame it.

Nancy, it is to be noted, was thinking in terms of "pathos," or tragedy, very frequently nowadays.

Sections of life and experience seemed to her to be just rising up irrationally out of the flat pattern that summer, and slapping her in the face. Some of the blows were the merest flicks and some were sickening knock-outs.

For an instance of the former there was the perfectly hopeless, stupid mother on their list, who insisted upon feeding her nine month's old infant molasses and corn bread. Upon Nancy's horrified remonstrances and modified milk formulas alike, she smiled with indulgent patronage and a sort of "there, there, little girl" mental pat on the head.

"Is it such a fearful *mistake* to be twenty-three?" Nancy had stormed, afterwards, to Mrs. Burns, and the latter had sighed: "I think it's the nicest thing in the whole world to be twenty-three." But for some reason that had failed to soothe Nancy's half-amused, half-ruffled *amour propre*.

Or, say that Nancy, recreation bent, would convey Miss Lætitia to a picture show in the evening. Was there any sane reason why—seeing other girls, with men, drift in gaily, always by twos—she

should suddenly feel gloomy, morose, almost ashamed of her state of manlessness? Idiotic—but true.

She had put off not only Standish, but other men, like Dick Sattler and Carter Simms, for so long, now—refused their invitations, had “other engagements,” shooed them out of a busy office when they came over leisurely to loaf and play. It was no wonder that they, with an eye anyway, on what they foolishly appeared to regard as Bob’s “claim,” seemed to have aggrievedly given her up at last. “Well, let them!” said her inward mind, with a tiny flare-up of temper.

Even Molly, the steady and serene, could sometimes be disturbing and, at other times, sit in grave judgment upon her doings. There was the moment when Nancy, in talking to her, had scoffed at the praise of her work by sentimentalists, who were always exclaiming, soulfully: “My child, you are doing a noble, Christian work. You will receive your reward!”

“I always tell ‘em brutally,” Nancy had remarked to Mrs. Burns, “that it’s a job, my work, like any other—school-teaching or nursing—only better paid; that I like to do a job well, so I labor at it. And that’s all there is to it. I refuse absolutely to be ‘noble!’”

Then Mrs. Burns had answered slowly, surprisingly: “Yes, it *is* a job. That’s the main trouble. We can’t always see the trees for the woods.”

That simple observation had inaugurated a

perfect third degree of self-administered cross-questioning in Nancy's perplexed mind, as to one's real attitude toward one's social clients—what it was, what it ought to be; as to the relative worth of efficient professionalism, simple helpful human interest, and that interest plus the glamour of the involuntary magic that a sense of the literary—the dramatic—values of existence cast about these "*miserables*,"—these more or less lovable rejects and misprints and strays out of Purgatory.

Yes, Molly, with her fine, uncomplicated simplicity, which was at the same time so searching was both enviable and provocative. And could she not hale one roundly before the bar, too! Nancy would not soon forget their difference of opinion about the child of a wretchedly poor washerwoman whom a wealthy, childless couple of fine sense and stamina wished to adopt and take elsewhere to live. Mrs. Burns had entered an immediate protest.

"Why?" demanded Nancy. "You didn't object when the Juvenile Court removed *five* children from Mrs. Larkin, because she couldn't rear them decently."

"That was very different," replied Mrs. Burns. "Mrs. Larkin was feeble-minded, beyond question, Milly's mother isn't. She has only committed the crime of poverty, and widowhood, and of having too many children. But she's getting ahead—she has character. I dare say you could persuade her, only you mustn't."

"But," Nancy insisted, "isn't a child, with her whole life and a wonderful chance like this before her, of more relative importance than an adult with some natural, but on the whole selfish objections? I don't think we ought to look at this sentimentally."

"Of course," said Mrs. Burns evenly, and in the same tone, "the sentimentality of mothers about their children is appalling, I grant you—so widespread, too. Even I, who am supposed to be of the upper classes, am guilty of it frequently toward Jimsy." (It was her pet name for her little son.) "For example, I can't conceive of my giving Jimsy away because I have to work downtown for my living. Silly of me, I know, but——"

Nancy had both hands in the air. "Help! Help!" she was begging, weakly. And that was the end of *that* incident.

But, sometimes, all these unimportant things, ideas, questions, happenings, tiny pictures—Jimsy coming in at 5:30 with his shining face to escort his mother happily home; the little trinities, a man, his wife, and child, speeding past her in a homing automobile; the careless, laughing couples at the picture show—all these things chased each other around in maddening circles in a tired brain.

She told Dr. MacLean one day, with a wry laugh, when she went to return some of his books on psychiatry she had been reading, that she believed she had developed, that summer, a new

psychological disorder, which she really ought to give to Science—the Squirrel Cage Mind.

But she did not tell him, or Molly Burns, or Peg Lawton, or Bob, when she wrote to them, or even herself, for a long time, about the one Thing that was so relentlessly stalking her through all her times of solitude and night—the Thing beside which the small worries and perplexities of this unwonted cycle of introspection were sometimes welcome distractions, greedily seized. It crept close behind her—this stealthy Thing—some nights when she stood at her bedroom window, looking out upon the moon-splashed blackness of the street that was really a road, leading past the house to the river. It began its work, mostly, with a sort of wailing around the corners of her mind, which she could hear when things were quiet.

“Margery, Margery!” the cry was, sometimes, “why did you do it? Why did you? If I had understood, would you have—just the same?” And other times: “Was it love I didn’t understand, Margery? Was that it? Oh! but I don’t want to! I don’t, I don’t! Love is a terrible thing. It killed my mother. It killed you. . . . And I would love like that, too—not sensibly and cheerily, like other people.”

For a while she could stop there. She needn’t go any further, if she got her hold in time.

But there was one night—hot and sultry, with a hint of storm—when she tossed tormentedly, with wide, burning eyes, and finally rose and lit the

candles on her dressing-table, sitting down, in her nightgown, on a stool in front of it.

The old pot-pourri jar that she had loved ever since she was a baby sat sedately before her in the candle-light, and she cuddled it in her two hands and breathed deep of its musty peace, her restless, wretched eyes on a little yellowed miniature of her mother, made in the last year of her life, that hung in its narrow gold frame on the wall very near. Such a sweet young face it was—with great, sorrowful dark eyes that made one cry to look at them. Nancy dropped her head, her cloud of black hair falling down unheeded around the pot-pourri jar. But she was not crying. She was thinking—a very old and quite irrational thought, especially in view of all her advanced religious scepticism: “He doesn’t need her as much as I do. I know he doesn’t. He had no right to take her away from me, when I’ve needed her so. When I need her—need her now!” Then, resentfully: “She was weak and she loved him, so she went. But he could have waited.”

She kept thinking of him, her father, and as she thought she slowly raised her head until she was looking at her own face, between the candles in the mirror. And suddenly the Thing came up from behind and looked over her shoulder into the mirror, too, and for the first time she stared at It, between the eyes, steadily and grimly.

“‘The sins of the fathers,’” It said, insinuatingly, “‘unto the third and fourth generations,’ you

know. Your father was the third—it hit him first. You're the fourth, I believe? Margery was only the second, wasn't she, so far as we can learn?"

"It's a lie," she said to It, furiously. "A ridiculous, melodramatic lie that you can't expect any sane person with a sense of humor to believe."

It shrugged, indifferently, remarking: "*I* didn't invent psychiatry, I'm sure, or write the textbooks. But you've been reading them, lately; you know what they say. There's your alcoholism history, in the generations back of your father—straight insanity, with him—hereditary predisposition, I think it's in fifty per cent of the cases, isn't it?" A pause. "Your nervous instability, now, emotionalism, sudden nerve exhaustion, and all those other little premonitory symptoms. Looks pretty significant to *me*. Foregone conclusion, I should say."

"Nonsense!" she flashed back in trembling defiance. "Anybody could have those characteristics without that history."

"Oh! well," It would finish sweetly, "occasionally skips a generation, you know. But you're never going to be married and have any children, so that would be all right."

Sometimes, after this, in the evenings under the lamp across from a placid Cousin Lætitia doing cross-stitch, Nancy would pore over Dr. MacLean's books for an hour and sit for another hour pretending to be still reading. It was really too bad that Bob was not there to say to her: "You,

my dear, are suffering at present from what is technically known (to me) as a 'symptom jag'! It is a well-known and common psychosis of the readers of patent-medicine advertisements that begin, 'Are you dizzy? Have you lost your appetite? Do you wake up with a tired feeling in the mornings?' and so forth. In ten minutes you have, or are, the list, and nothing in this world will save you but 'Branson's Nervine'!"

Nancy thought a great deal about the question of transmittal to one's children of a "predisposition." It would never, never do, of course, and yet—it would be rather wonderful to have children—they were such precious little things. (She thought of Tad.) Fragments of tragic romances floated through her cloudy, fearful brain like wisps of cigarette smoke—white-lipped heroines saying, dramatically, "My line dies with me! I will NOT perpetuate THE TAINT!"

Some mornings Nancy would wake early to a blue and golden day, and the dark miasmas of the night would shrivel mistily and dry up in the steady sunlight full upon them. She would tackle her day for a touchdown. But the blaze of the hottest summer in a decade would wither her bodily before night and the dreaded questions would raise their heads again and begin to stalk about when evening fell. She lost color, developed a quivering nervousness and sensitiveness to noises, and little fine lines began to show in her smooth white forehead.

It was the heat, she told everybody—Molly and Cousin Lætitia and Mammy Line. Molly Burns added to herself “and Bob Singleton,” for she had decided finally that that must be the solution of Nancy’s manifest, if mute unhappiness.

She *was* unhappy, beyond a doubt, with that sick-souled unhappiness of the person suffering those most terrible of all ills—self-absorption and self-pity. The twin maladies had struck her down all unaware, she who had never before known the meaning of self-consciousness, who had turned upon the round earth the eager, fascinated gaze of a child at the big circus, who had had all her life neither time nor inclination to look within, save for brief, curious moments and hasty withdrawal before confusion.

And there was no steam exhaust at hand. To Peggy Lawton she still wrote—she had stopped writing to the other college girls months ago, in the fierce rush of her work—but this wasn’t the kind of thing one could write about to Peg or to anybody, least of all, Standish. For some reason she couldn’t talk to Molly, or to Mr. Payne, with his shining assurance that one had only to “take it all to the Lord,” when she hadn’t the least idea how to!

There remained V. A. Craig. But V. A. was so of the earth earthy. He would be quite intolerant of fine-drawn spiritual crises and the like vaporish stuff. Life was a business, with a definite technique, for V. A., though it did not happen to be

that of making money, and, in general, people interested him only in so far as they were assets or liabilities in that business. He had a satirist's insight, but he used it commercially.

And Bob, for whom every weakness in her and strength as well cried out, Bob she could not reach. Blessed old Bob, who was a stout rock in a hurricane! His common sense and humor, too, would endure, she was certain, though the heavens should fall and the earth reel beneath him. People had said the same of her humor, but alas! it was under a total eclipse, this miserable summer.

Thus the days dragged by, while misery of others piled higher in her office and misery of self higher in her heart.

CHAPTER XVI

MOONLIGHT, THEOLOGY, AND A SENSE OF HUMOR

ON and around the first of August a number of things happened. First, V. A. Craig, to the grief of the local Trades Council, moved to Big Bend to take a better job.

"Well! Keep your head on!" was his parting advice to Nancy, and he added, "See you at the Capitol in January," grinned amiably and departed.

Mrs. Burns left for Chicago for a month's study and field work, that being her idea of a rest, and Clara Bingham, on vacation, came into the Welfare Association's office to substitute for her, that being *her* idea of a rest. She was under contract with Protheroe for another three months, beginning October 1st, and after that, as she explained to Nancy, "*la deluge—parce que* I am certainly going to the Legislature in January with you, my child, job or no job to hold. Silver threads are beginning to appear among the sandy and I most emphatically intend to have at least one political fling before I settle down to school-teaching for the balance of my days."

Nancy smiled. "You appear to regard the Legislature in the light of a wholesome recreation.

I'm thinking from all indications, and V. A.'s cranky, discouraging attitude, that we're in for a pretty stiff fight."

"Certainly!" said Miss Bingham, in a tone of surprise. "That's the idea." And Nancy laughed, much pleased with her ally.

It was nice to have Clara around with her funny little stories of the district children, and her quick enthusiasm. Clara certainly did not sleep through her days like some women. She knew everything that went on within a radius of at least fifty miles of her. Beneath that plain, stolid-seeming, reliable exterior (people were always calling Clara "reliable," or "well-meaning" or something as stupid) was a keen, darting curiosity that stopped at nothing short of exact fact. Much potential initiative she had, too.

Also, most people were panes of glass to her.

"You've got no business humdrumly teaching school, Clara," a friend said to her one day in Nancy's presence. "You have entirely too much sense."

But Clara shook her head. "The most I have is nowhere near enough to mold children," she answered; and Nancy, with her own hectic school-days in mind, said "Amen" to that in heartfelt italics.

Clara told her a lot of things she ought to have known and didn't.

"Protheroe's not going to have nearly so easy a time getting nominated for Senator from this

district in the primaries next month as he thinks he is," she remarked one day, for instance.

"That so?" asked Nancy, interestedly. "Why not?"

"Well, in the first place, it's such a curious thing for a County Judge to do—run for the Legislature and no pay, almost, while he's still in a paying office. People are not understanding it at all. Of course the *election* for representatives isn't really until November, when his term as Judge expires, so it's legal enough for him to run. Primaries aren't legal affairs, you know. But why in the world he wants to do it, when he could probably win his endorsement term as County Judge more easily, is more than *I* see—unless," shrugging, "he's got some pet boodling scheme up his sleeve for this particular session. A lot of that goes on up there, they say, and I wouldn't put it beyond him for a minute."

Nancy looked thoughtful. "I don't believe he'd be going up there just to beat a bill of ours, or put over his special school district, either," she mused, "though I suppose our bill will hit his finances pretty hard. Anyway, he's been intending to go for a year, before the bill was thought of, V. A. says, and he always knows. I don't see why he wants to go, either. Never have. But what's your main reason for thinking he may not get the Senatorial nomination? He invariably does. He's a master of the technique of getting elected, and his opponent's a hopeless dub."

"There's a report going around among the men," Clara answered,—"hadn't you heard it?—that Protheroe's going to try to have that no-account brother-in-law of his, McShayne, the road contractor, nominated for County Judge next month to succeed him, as a warming-pan to hold the job for him till he gets through doing whatever he's going up to do in the Legislature. My brother told me all about it. McShayne's to be a 'dark horse,' sprung on the voters at the last minute to make it a three-cornered fight and split up the strength. Neither one of the other candidates is much good. Tom Dixon again, you know, and that Police Judge. We'll know on the first, of course, when they all have to file notice of candidacy. But the rumor's well-grounded, spreading, too. And I don't believe, from what Tommy says, the town's going to stand for McShayne, and Protheroe's dictation. They may both lose out, trying to grab everything like that. There's been a lot of ugly talk of graft, you know, in the road-district contracts McShayne's been getting from him right along."

"No," replied Nancy, crestfallen, "I didn't know. I'm afraid I'm not much of a politician, Clara. I get switched onto one track or another, somehow."

"You *didn't*?" Clara asked, amazed. "Just where have you been spending the summer, my dear?"

"In a place by the name of Hell," Nancy wanted

to say, but she substituted, rather impatiently: "Oh! I've had as little to do with the subject of Protheroe as possible, lately—he's been so darned disagreeable and we weren't ready to do anything about him, yet. And I've been pretty absorbed with a lot of things and have lost touch with people—rather. That's all."

Clara glanced at her face, and quickly shifted the discussion to "case work" into which she was daily casting all her vigor and intelligence. The stir and activity of it was wine to her spirit after ten years of schoolrooms, and she was thirstily soaking up the new facts and experiences.

She did not ask, again, questions verging upon the personal, but she watched Nancy keenly from that day on, though the latter was quite unaware of it, as intrigued by her abstracted attitude as Mrs. Burns had been, but without finding her supposed solution.

The Public Welfare bill was coming on famously, Nancy reported. Clara Bingham submerged, up to her eyes, in all the relevant material Nancy had gathered. One week-end the two drove to Big Bend in Bob's car and spent a pious Sunday with Dr. Gunnell, drafting and re-drafting, to their hearts' content. Microscopes adjusted, they fitted the jig-sawed intricacies of state and county needs together to make their patterned scheme of a state-wide system that was, eventually, to offer to every dependent person in the State, a fair, science-shaped chance at decent living. They wrote a lofty

preamble, too, which smacked of Thomas Jefferson. And they talked largely, in broad sweeping terminology—speaking of dependents, defectives, and delinquents, by classes, legislating for the unborn, scrapping (mentally if not on paper) their state penitentiary, jails, and convict camps, their old-fashioned orphanages, and so forth, into one junk pile, trimmed with the Protheroes and their ilk, to make room for modern substitutes under the supervision, of course, of the State citizen commission they were creating.

Altogether it was a very pleasant way to spend a Sunday. On the trip home, however, Clara Bingham had a few prickly misgivings.

"You don't by any chance think it's all too—er—visionary and sweeping, do you, Nancy?" she inquired with a hint of anxiety.

"No," quite positively. "We may sound so, talking, but the bill isn't. It's just the solidified sense and experience of other states. Perfectly workable. Or at least it will be when we're through."

"But," said Clara, still a bit uneasily. "We're getting to be sort of professional abolitionists, aren't we? We begin, in the bill, by abolishing convict and pauper leasing, which is all right; but we're going to end with the abolition of half the penitentiary's power, and most everything else, as far as I can see!"

But Nancy didn't see the matter that way and Clara wasn't so very sure that she did either; so,

on the whole, they stuck to their idea that they had had what they heathenishly termed "an unusually profitable Sunday."

Nancy watched Clara Bingham, too, during their month together. She had her hat off, continually, to the latter's "eighty horse-power energy," as she described it.

"You're quite marvelous, Clara," she sighed dispiritedly, one day, her listless gaze on the litter of pamphlets and reports environing the reading lady. "I manage to do my work, but you manage to enjoy yours." And she thought, woefully, "I was like that, once." Nancy felt about forty-five, at the moment. Herself of a few months ago lay æons behind her, and with the calm finality of youth she had closed the gate between—forever.

If Clara had not been so engrossed in her pamphlets at the moment she might have noted a trifling little occurrence in the way of a clue to Nancy's perplexing behavior. For the latter, turning her back to Clara, was earnestly engaged in checking that day off upon her desk calendar, and counting those left between it and September 1st—exactly twelve in number. But, perhaps it was just as well that Clara didn't observe, because she would probably have reached a sentimental conclusion, as silly and far-fetched, in the light of the well-known views of the young woman in question, as that of Mrs. Burns.

Promptly on the morning of September 1st, Bob returned. As he swung down from the car steps

his eyes swept the platform eagerly, with a sort of hungry joy in them, and in a moment, he had both of Nancy's hands in his, his forgotten suit case behind him. But he was looking down into her face with sudden bewilderment and pain.

"You've been sick, Nance, and you didn't tell me," he said in an undertone. "My little Nance! You're as white as a ghost. What have they been doing to you while I was gone?"

He led her to the waiting car, and then he apparently suffered one of those strange lapses of consciousness said to afflict a certain type, or stage, of lunacy, for he forgot that he had a home and a mother and several miscellaneous relatives—such as one brother, two sisters, and an aunt—all waiting for him. The nose of the Hup turned pikewards as if by instinct and it was some two hours later, across the railroad bridge, when Bob groaned and observed that he supposed there was nothing for it but a good, straightforward lie about the train service!

But they had talked about almost everything except Nancy, for Bob, seeing a shadow fall across her when he began to question, had, instead, striven successfully for smiles, with story after story of his summer.

"I'll be back for supper, Nance," he announced, calmly, as he stood with her at her front door. "'Course I haven't been invited, but a little thing like that——"

"You *are* invited, nice old thing," she cried,

warmly, patting his sleeve, "always, chronically," and then flushed—"like a fool" she thought, with astonished irritation—when he smiled back, long and straight, into her eyes before he left her.

And that night it was ten o'clock and then eleven o'clock, and eleven-thirty, and the minutes ticked on and on, after that, in Bob's big old-fashioned gold watch, as they sat, talking low and earnestly, in the shadow of the jasmine vines screening the moonlit porch.

They had begun with Nancy's work—that was such a good handle. She was profoundly discouraged about her work, she told him.

"At first, Bob—and I know this sounds terrible, but it's true—I was *glad* when the new cases poured in, in a flood, because we'd have such nice, full reports and such a busy time, and could justify our existence to the town right off, when it had been so skeptical. And the worse off the charity patients were, why, the more pleased I was—*think* of it—because the more exciting *it* was, you see, to work 'em out—the cases—and make 'em live happy ever after. Like a game to win! And they were all stories to me, too—such fascinating stories, more poignant than any I'd ever read."

Her voice hardened. "I was the presiding deity of them all, of course,—the guiding genius to make all the wrongs right. When I was a little girl," she broke in upon herself, "I used to be very good about going to bed early, but it was because I loved to lie there awake and dream the most beautiful

stories. And I was always the Princess in them with gold and silver dresses, being intensely noble all day long." Bob chuckled. "No, don't laugh, because it isn't funny. It was just the same thing, persisting, with me and my charity patients. Don't you see? Histrionics—all of it"—bitterly—"straight through."

"Why not call it 'youth'?" Bob said gently.

But she wouldn't.

"Then came Margery," Nancy's voice shook and righted itself. "And a few others—some women that people call bad. Women are wonderful, Bob—I'm only just learning it, and not in ways I thought, either."

"Then, Bob," she said again, leaning forward, "I suddenly saw that what I had under my hands, there, playing with, was *life*—a great terrible thing like dynamite, that I was just childishly knocking and pushing about."

After a moment she went on slowly. "But not any more—not childishly, any more. Now they pile up on me—the terrible new cases pressing in—and I feel smothered, sometimes, under the sodden weight of them—so many, so many, and so miserable! And me—with my foolish little broom, down there cheerfully trying to sweep the ocean back!"

She stopped and sat still, resting tiredly in her chair in the hazy moonlight that flickered tremulously through the vines upon the white filminess of her dress and the black shadow of her hair.

Bob bent forward, bringing her gaze down to him, again. "But you aren't just one broom, you know," he said quietly. "That's the point. One starts dozens going and by and by there's at least a clean stretch through the muck. Take my humble, amateurish self, for illustration," and he smiled. "I fought your going into this thing, you remember. I think I saw you just as you are, tonight, from the beginning—I've been at it so long, Nancy—sickness and death—pain,—sunup to sun-down. It gets you now and then. And I wanted you spared it all.

"I suppose it's natural," he added, as if apologizing to himself, "for a man to want to spare the women he cares for most, all suffering and knowledge of evil. But Nancy, listen to me." His voice called her back urgently from her misty borderland. "I was wrong. And *you're* the one who showed me I was. No one ought to shield anyone—woman or not—from *facts*. They're there—we ought to face 'em, every blamed one of us—man, woman, and child." He continued:

"When I saw you sail so fearlessly into the whole rotten mess here, dragging me out of my professional slump along with you to help—and dragging half this town besides, I said to myself in plain disgust: 'And *that's* what I would have "spared" her—the joy of playing the game, herself, for big stakes, and wiping out a lot of misery and growing to be a big, brave-souled woman!' I wanted to 'spare' you from doing your own living, in other

words, and making us all live a little decenter, thereby."

"Oh!" Nancy begged, in real unhappiness, "don't—don't praise me, Bob dear. I—just can't quite bear that. I've been such a wretched coward this summer. You don't know. I'm not 'brave-souled' at all. Oh! you make me want to grovel, Bob!"

He laughed, teasingly. "Go on and grovel, then. You seem to be in a groveling mood." But his eyes were not laughing at all to match his voice. They were quite intently observant, as they had been all evening.

So then, bit by bit, she told him the whole nightmare. Once he muttered something. It sounded like "damn fool," but he was referring to himself and not to her. Otherwise he sat, without exclamation or comment. She began to be a little puzzled, as she proceeded, by the quality of his silence. Not unsympathetic, exactly—but not awfully responsive, either. When she finished he asked, coolly, "That all?"

"Yes," she answered, rather nettled by his tone. "It's *enough*, isn't it?" What did he mean?

He shrugged, slightly, by way of answer—an unusual gesture with him. "Whom did you say you'd read on psychiatry?" he asked next.

She told him again, wonderingly.

"And you haven't read Kraepelin, or MacPherson, or Griesinger, or Ford-Robertson, of course?" he said, indulgently. (Neither had he, for that

matter, but then she didn't know that.) "You're a fine illustration, my dear, of that saying about a little knowledge being a dangerous thing." His tone was dispassionate, critical. She was a "case," in other words.

Nancy had the shocked, indignant feeling of one who has been rudely pushed off a springboard into an icy, if shallow, pond. Tragic dignity much bedraggled, she came to the surface with a gasp.

But he forestalled her, remaining on the offensive. "Never occurred to you, equally of course, that you might be one of the *other* fifty per cent—the fifty per cent *not* predisposed to insanity? That you were manufacturing your own symptoms—insomnia and all—right along? That you were basing your whole theory on insufficient data you'd be the first to condemn if it applied to one of your own cases?" He went straight on: "Never heard me tell my story of a patient—little man, given up by all the doctors and psychologists as a hopeless alcoholic—drink in his family for generations back of him, and so forth—who just simply took a grip on his nerve and plain *quit*, at fifty-five? Shucks! And *you* swallowed this stuff whole?" with incredulity. "All rot, that," he finished, inelegantly, nonchalantly. "Nothing to it, you know." As if utterly bored with so trivial a matter he lit a cigarette and leaned back in his creaking wicker chair, studying the moon interestedly through an opening in the vines.

Nancy, stunned, ran a gamut, several gamuts, in

fact, her emotions ranging from infuriation to cringing shame. She began at least six different sentences, in her mind, that is—dignified defense—outraged repudiation of his utter lack of understanding—smiling superiority before ignorance—wounded grief, and so forth. And, after all that, what she actually did, in a moment, was to laugh, rather shakily, but with an unmistakably Nancyish ring of humor! And, at that, Bob laughed, too, almost as shakily, had she but known it, and said, "So *that's* all right is it, Nance?"

She leaned far forward, took his strong brown hand in both of hers and laid her cheek for one moment against it, for an answer. He made a quick movement toward her, but she was whispering, "My wonderful old pal," and, at her words, he sank back again and so did she. They sat, quiet, for a long time, he puffing away, she with closed eyes and the tears of relief from pain upon her face, breathing in the blessed unhaunted peace of the serene moonlight and the strength of a comradeship that needed no words.

He was the first to speak, slowly, between puffs, and he started a long way from his destination. "Do you believe anything, Nance, by way of religion?"

She came back to distress, reluctantly.

"I never have," she said, "but I read up on Christianity this summer." He smiled, but she was quite serious. "And I went to hear Mr. Payne a lot. What he says on doctrine—damnation for

most, heaven for a few, work hard to save your soul—all that—I don't believe a word of—bores me, but what he *is* I'm on my knees to. He's wonderful—he has hold of something, and I don't know what it is. You should see the faces of the unhappy when he leaves them, Bob."

She sat up, more interested. "I went and told him I'd discovered Christ, the Great Leader. Not Oscar Wilde's individualist, or Bouck White's socialist, or Rauschenbusch's revolutionist, but my own Guide, Social Worker, and Great Friend. Was that an irreverent way to put it?"

He shook his head.

"I asked him if I had to believe in all the doctrine and miracles, because I didn't. He was too big and fine to be shocked, but he said I didn't understand the real meaning of those things. He's about the sixty-first person who's told me that," wearily. "I 'don't understand' children, and girls in love, and men, and mothers—and religion, now—it seems. He thinks I'm merely a hopeful, would-be Christian, I gathered, not a real one at all. So I guess I still haven't any religion, Bob." She added, "A lot of people at college seemed to think it was rather smart to be skeptical. I never have, though. I think it's desolate."

"The only way I ever found out *I* had any," said Bob, conversationally (she had never before in her life heard him talk about himself like this), "was to quit wondering what I believed, if anything, and watch myself a while to *see* what I be-

lieved. People act on premises, you know, whether they're conscious of 'em or not. For instance, if you didn't really think that things move from bad to better—upward—you wouldn't be shoving, you'd be resting, wouldn't you? And you're bound to think human beings are better than they are bad, or you wouldn't work over cases and lean on the town."

"Yes," agreed Nancy, distinctly interested, "and then, crowds." They were her gauge of inspiration, always.

"Well," he continued, reasonably, "there's your working principle of good, isn't it, your underlying evolutionary plan? And there's faith. I'd call that a religion. You've even got a spiritual leader, you said just now. As for prayer, haven't you ever lost yourself utterly in your cause, sometimes, and felt Something big rush in and sweep you right along? I have, fighting hard for somebody's life."

"Yes—in crowds," she said, again.

"We linked up with the Force then, that's all. Mr. Payne does it through channels and we do it outside, but it's the same Force—bound to be."

He came a little nearer his objective. "You know," he went on leisurely. "I suppose they'd class me with the morons if I published my religion—all of it, that is. Guess I'm a deluded damn fool, but I have a very strong impression—fatalisms to the contrary, notwithstanding—that 'I am the captain of my soul—the master of my

fate,'" he quoted with a smile at his own seriousness. "I have the feeling, chronically, that I can get anywhere I particularly want to go—that's a *right* place—if I only keep wanting to, hard enough. And remember my wonderful little man who licked alcoholism and heredity at fifty-five? I can't help believing that nothing on this earth or above it—failure, or success, or what's behind or what's before, or death and the hereafter to come—can hurt a man or throw him one fraction of an inch out of his stride, unless he lets it! And, if it's all a joke at the end—and there wasn't any plan, or any hereafter, why—if I've lived up to *that*, then the joke won't be on me!"

His steady, controlled voice continued, saying other things, but Nancy listened, with a thrill that strung her taut, as to bugles shrilling their valiant defiance through the night up at the indifferent stars—brave bugles that called her out of self and its weakness—out to battle and the frontier. But she could not say one word and after a time he, too, fell silent and they sat, so, for a long while.

Strange talk this, for the moon and the jasmine vines to be hearing. Since when had youth in moonlight talked theology and "hereditary predispositions" and the like? The listening moon was puzzled, the white-starred jasmines rustled and quivered protestingly. And a milky phlox growing at their feet said, in prim disapproval, to the big silver moth visiting her: "They did things *very* differently, in my day."

Silence lengthened and the waiting moon grew hopeful, but when the man began again it was about something of no interest whatsoever and she sulkily veiled her face, thinking, doubtless, "No use wasting glorious radiance on those two!"

"By the way," Bob was saying casually, "did you know you were leaving for the Ozark Mountains day after to-morrow to spend the month?"

Nancy gasped, audibly.

"Yes," he continued smoothly. "You will turn things over to Mrs. Burns, who comes to-morrow, pack the bottom of your trunk with trashy novels, forget to leave your mailing address at the office and go. Get me? Hold on," as she began a protest. "Clara's agreed to stay another month; Alice is to come and visit Miss Lætitia. She and I fixed it all up this afternoon while you were at work."

"But money—Bob!"

"I told you we fixed it all up, didn't I?"

"Bob, you loaned her that money. I can't——"

"Now, see here," he said severely. "That's my business. Anyway, Miss Lætitia has made me her real-estate agent and I'm to make you-all heaps of money selling your land scattered around. Never mind all that, anyhow. Listen to me. I want to tell you about those mountains."

Half an hour later he rose, with a sigh, and she stood up, too. He put his hands upon her shoulders and turned her toward the moonlight, looking searchingly into her face.

"All right, now, Nance?" he asked gently, as he had before. "Sure?"

She nodded tremulously, with a glow in her eyes. "I see now why one of your patients called you his 'soul doctor,'" she said. "You—you restoreth my soul, Bob!"

They laughed together over the wrong tense, standing so, a moment, in comradely fashion.

And she did not so much as guess that his arms were aching distraughtly to close round her and that above the hot pounding of his heart his brain was saying, urgently, "Steady—steady, old man! Would you hit a little chap that's down?"

But, at that, the disgusted moon disappeared entirely from view!

CHAPTER XVII

THE LABOR CONVENTION CALLS TIME

"BROTHERS," announced V. A. Craig from the rostrum of the State Labor Convention, "two of the finest and cleverest girls in this State are standin' just outside our door wantin' to talk to us," he glanced again, smiling, at a note in his hand, "but wonderin' whether they ought to come in or not. What's the answer?"

There was a great laugh from the crowd before him, a gust of applause, and a turning of heads toward a perfectly empty doorway, in the corridor outside of which Nancy and Clara Bingham, who had breezed into the Hall cocksurely enough, were shrinking, abashed, against a wall. It was not surprising. There was certainly nothing of feminine appeal about the Convention, contrary to their somewhat vague expectations of mixed audiences.

In the first place the air was blue with cigarette smoke—heavy with it. There was not a woman in the place, and lounging all about, were men, men, men—several hundred—all kinds, ages, and descriptions—city men, country men, woods men—a swart, stocky fellow here who looked like a miner; over there by the window, smoking lazily, with his

feet up on a chair, a big, rough, red-headed chap who might have been a lumber jack; near him a pale young cripple, with the upturned, rapt face of a dreamer.

The two girls, partially hidden, had hesitated for several minutes, staring in curiously, but timidly, listening to V. A. Craig's voice, sharp and staccato, putting motions and resolutions for vote, and the deep, growling, rhythmic ayes and noes of the crowd. Nancy at last mustered up nerve enough to scribble a note to Craig and send it in by a man who came up behind them and politely offered to get them seats. She had simply asked V. A., in the note, to arrange a time for her to talk on the Public Welfare bill, which she and Clara had brought to the Convention for endorsement, "later in the afternoon, perhaps" (it was then only 1:30) "when 'some ladies' might be there."

His answer—and the Convention's—embarrassed them greatly. The red-headed man, at Craig's announcement, promptly threw up all the windows and cigarette stubs began to fly through them as the smoke drifted out; a general hitching around of chairs and putting down of feet ensued and, in a moment, Craig, smiling broadly, appeared in the doorway and found them, too game to run but overwhelmed with confusion.

They followed him in, all blushes, but laughing at the accompanying applause and were seated on the front row and immediately voted "fraternal delegates," being decorated at once with green

silk badges by the old, kindly white-haired Secretary. From that moment on Craig referred to them from the Chair with a bantering solemnity as "Sister Carroll" and "Sister Bingham," and they were accorded all the privileges of the floor, except the vote.

The interrupted routine proceeded. Nancy sat, about half of her mind concentrated on the Convention, whose mechanism seemed to be moving with an ordered swiftness that carried the most amazing volume of business past her uncomprehending head. She was interested, yet the other half of her mind persisted in going round and round her bill, about which she was worrying quite a bit. And her attention was intermittent.

She and Clara had come up to this little town in the northeast corner of the State, straight from the annual meeting, in Carrollton, of the Federation of Women's Clubs. To both conventions they went as representatives of the Social Workers Conference and its Legislative Committee.

Craig had been made a member of the Committee, and had been pretty coöperative, except in one matter, and that was the thing worrying her now. Over her Public Welfare Bill—the real *raison d'être* of the Committee—he had yawned maddeningly and consistently, in the meetings; had damned it with faint praise; had seemed to barely tolerate the discussions and the work upon it, never committing himself. Nancy was puzzled, and indignant with him, frequently. One day,

after the lengthy, statesmanlike document had been brought to its perfect close and sent to the printer, she had flourished triumphantly under his nose a letter from Spencer Ames, of the National Public Welfare Conference, which said: "Your bill is eminently practical and superior to any of the kind now in existence in other States—a model measure." And V. A., reading it, had merely flipped it away, nonchalantly, yawning again!

"All right!" she had flashed at him angrily. "Mount your fence! But I'll hew to my line."

Nancy was wondering, however, if he'd accept her invitation to do so that afternoon, when she appealed for the support of the Convention. He could hurt her cause fearfully and quite easily by blocking this vital endorsement. Even the nice friendliness of the crowd wouldn't save her if V. A. did—Surely he *wouldn't*, though, after saying he'd be glad to have them come? She scowled at him—thinking—and at that very moment he caught her eye and grinned at her, teasingly, delightfully, as of old.

She gave him up at that. He was beyond her, with his mixtures of behavior.

What were they doing now? She listened. The secretary was reading messages of greeting, from everywhere under the sun, it appeared—a federation in Pennsylvania one minute and in Colorado the next; American Federation officials, a French Workmen's Compensation League—a British

Miners Conference. What solidarity, nationalism—internationalism, even! Here, way off in a remote State, thought Nancy, sat this small, unknown Federation, made up, mostly, of the plainest working men, yet through it was sweeping a great current of thought and effort, fused in a comradeship that belted the round globe. Wonderful! Millennial glimpses, there.

Those club women, too, had been splendid in organization. She smiled to herself, suddenly, remembering something. How, in the middle of her speech to the women, while outlining the provisions of the bill, her eyes had happened upon Mrs. Protheroe, on the back row, industriously taking notes! It was Protheroe's little threat in answer to the open declaration of war that any speech upon the bill in Carrollton was bound to be.

Protheroe had been nominated State Senator on September 15th. As Clara had prophesied, however, he had won the nomination "by the skin of his teeth" and with the help of an insignificant newspaper of the town which gossip said he owned, while McShayne, his candidate to succeed him, had been ingloriously beaten in the primaries. Moreover—and this was the most illuminating fact of all—Protheroe had been reelected school-director in District 21 by a majority of only four votes, a clear presage of future defeat. When it happened Clara had jubilantly written Nancy all about it, adding: "At this point it would be fitting

and customary to drag out the poor old time-worn 'mills of the gods' and explain how they grind, but, for my part, I've always thought—haven't you?—that they turned inside a man's own head. Protheroe's mill must be a special up-to-date 1913 model, though! . . ."

Nancy came back to the present, abruptly. Walter Stone, her machinist friend from Carrollton, who was perhaps V. A. Craig's staunchest supporter, had come from the back of the hall and was sitting down in the chair next to her. They exchanged whispered comments and he answered her questions for a few moments, but he seemed to give her very divided attention and she let him alone, presently. He sat, then, listening intently, resting in heavy immobility in his chair, with only his eyes alert and oddly anxious.

A certain "Brother Sanderson" seemed to be doing a lot of talking. He was a contentious somebody, though he spoke rather well. Nancy turned around idly, at last, but he had just sat down, being succeeded by a very long-winded old fellow whom V. A. handled neatly and disposed of, in a minute.

A resolution, pretty soon, developed a bit more wrangling than had come to the surface previously. Nancy, listening, became conscious of tensions in her "nice, friendly crowd," conscious that V. A. was holding a firm, if light rein and once in a while flicking the whip. Walter Stone was following Craig's every move with the utmost concentration,

an increasingly grim look upon his square, honest, likable face.

"What's up?" she whispered to him once, consumed with curiosity, but he shook his head, smiling, and fell to watching Craig again. Clara, on her other side, was doing it too—steadily.

Nancy could not have sworn to it, but several times during the next hour she thought that a signal—a look, the raising of an eyebrow, the lowering of a lid—passed from V. A. to Stone, who did an unusual amount of talking during that time, and who circulated about in the rear, once, in a sort of intermission in business. There was that peculiar tension, again, soon after that, but in the midst of it V. A. somehow shelved issues, rising to remark: "Brothers, we're about to forget that Sister Carroll, here, has come a long way just to talk to us a few minutes. Hadn't we better let her do it, before it gets any later?" And Nancy was at once on her feet, her heart pounding a little, her back to his rostrum.

After her third sentence she had them, cupped in her hand. Tensions slackened, factions died. She had them, to a man. Nothing, subsequently, convinced her to the contrary. At that moment she *knew*.

Presently she swung into a presentation of the bill, the "charities" end first, then the "corrections" aspects, telling of its preparation, the Committee's unanimous vote upon it, its provisions.

V. A. Craig, behind her, stirred restlessly and finally interrupted: "Sister Carroll's forgetting that a few of us think some of those provisions are impractical and should be—" But Nancy, instantly apprehensive, flashed around upon him, daringly, saucily.

"Mister President," she said. "I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to the Convention!"

There was a delighted roar from the crowd and Craig, with a grin, resumed his seat, meekly. A minute later Nancy was really talking, not to the Convention but to one man. He was sitting by the big, red-headed man, whose name was Brent, she had learned, and his thin, sallow face was familiar. A Carrollton delegate, she was sure. He puzzled her, for he was with her,—she knew it from his eyes—yet against her, with a hostile and even sneering expression clamped upon his countenance. She concentrated upon convincing him (which was strange, for she knew him to be already convinced). But she wanted that expression off of his face and it wouldn't come off. On the other side of him was a third Carrollton delegate, stolid, but obviously a friend.

She finished swiftly, at the height of ardor, and there was a brief silence, then a crash of applause, and three men were on their feet. A motion for "unqualified endorsement of the movement," and so forth, read by Walter Stone from a paper, had some fifty seconds. But at V. A.'s call for discussion the thin, dark puzzling Carrollton man stood

up and was recognized as "Brother Sanderson." Twisting around, Nancy eyed him curiously. So *he* was the talkative brother.

He began what sounded like a mere seconding speech for the bill and Brent, at his side, moved impatiently. But in a moment it developed that "Brother Sanderson," who was a clever talker withal, had a few "grave doubts" up his sleeve. Not of the bill, at first—oh! no—though perhaps it *might* work out to be rather—er—"impractical," as our great President had just hinted, to try to set up the Kingdom of Heaven in the State, right off, the way that bill seemed to want to do. Nancy clenched her fists. People were quiet, listening.

It seemed a pretty large order, he said—what that bill called for. He wondered how sheriffs and County Judges and Legislators, sent up to protect the interests of their counties, would take it—all those boards nosing around and interfering, you know. He was roughly interrupted at that point, but Craig rapped for order and he proceeded.

But the thing that bothered him most, he said, was not this bill. It was what would happen to their own labor bills if the Federation went and got itself all tangled up by endorsing a thing like this Welfare scheme that was sure to bring on a big fight and a lot of political opposition.

"Boys, we've got our I. and R. at stake," he said, fervently. (They had fought desperately for years for an adequate Initiative and Referendum amendment to the constitution, and victory, by Legisla-

tive action, was almost in sight.) "And it's life or death with us," he went on fiercely. "Are we goin' to risk losin' it now and goin' down in defeat—at the very last minute, by takin' on doubtful cargo like this that may founder us? *That's* what's worryin' *me*, Brothers."

He sat down, frowning. Heads were nodding, here and there, in thoughtful agreement; a few men looked perplexed, some looked angry.

Nancy was staring at V. A. in wordless appeal. He met her eyes and with a queer, cynical little smile, which she did not fully understand until afterwards, rose.

"Damnation," growled Walter Stone, next to her, under his breath. "It's come," and he fixed his eyes anxiously upon his chief.

Craig put a man in the chair, stepped down from the rostrum and, quite simply, took sides.

"Yes, the present bill's got impractical features," he stated, his eyes on Sanderson. "Sister Carroll, in all honesty, doesn't think so, but then," smiling, "she hasn't had quite as many years yet in politics as we have. This bill will be amended," he announced, decisively—Nancy started—"then it ought to pass. The motion, as made, commits us only to endorsement of the movement, not of this particular measure." He faced the crowd directly. "And God knows, and *you* ought to, that it's time *somebody* did some movin' in this State on behalf of the down-and-outs. If labor's afraid to stand up for 'em, *who will?* That's all I've got to

say." He sat down abruptly on the front row with his back to the audience.

The Convention, on the contrary, had things to say for exactly one hour and twenty minutes—things heated, relevant and irrelevant, yet guarded, on the whole, because of Clara and herself, Nancy supposed, and with a certain semblance of order.

"But," she whispered amazedly, to Stone, after the first few minutes, under cover of a three-cornered debate and the rapping of the distraught temporary chairman's gavel, "they're fighting *him*, fighting V. A., Mr. Stone, not the bill."

He scarcely heard her. He sat, tense of muscle, as if ready for a spring into the midst of it. She and Clara were rigid, eyes discreetly forward.

"We just can't do it, boys. It ain't business," she heard Sanderson half shout, presently, anent endorsement, and, in one of the rare silences, big Brent's drawling, sarcastic retort:

"Ain't it? Then that's *all* I want to know 'bout it. I'm for it—strong!" And "her" side scored with the general laugh that momentarily eased the strain.

Out of the verbal *mêlée* that ensued Nancy sharply singled a fact or two. Her bill was being whip-sawed thin and ragged between two factions, or maybe three or four, that were not primarily interested in it at all, but in V. A. Craig, who still sat stubbornly silent, arms crossed, with his back to them. They all stuck to the subject of the bill and his endorsement of it, in the main, but insinua-

tions were beginning to go wide. She and Clara would have felt horribly out of place if anyone had been paying the slightest attention to them, but no one was.

After a while, however, Nancy heard, "Miss Carroll." Walter Stone, across the room from them by this time, was saying something about her "—these splendid ladies that have come here to fight for a bill that means nothing to them, personally," and so on.

"Aw!" shouted Sanderson, sneeringly, beside himself, by now, with the heat of his own arguments, "just because a pretty woman comes up here——"

But, at that, red-headed Brent rose leisurely from his place beside him, and, with a hand upon Sanderson's collar, sat him down, hard, with much more force than ceremony and a look that quieted. Also V. A. Craig stood up, in a kind of weary disgust, saying, in the dead silence:

"Well, boys—had enough?"

Ten minutes later, a thoroughly shamefaced convention unanimously voted "aye" upon the motion to endorse "a movement now under way to secure by Legislative enactment a state-wide system, and so forth," thus presaging their likewise unanimous reelection within two days, of Craig as fourth-term President.

There was a sort of forward surge of men at the end of that afternoon session and Nancy and Clara found themselves surrounded by a crowd that was

like nothing so much as a group of ashamed, grinning small boys, bashfully—or explanatorily, endeavoring to make amends. "Brother" Sanderson was not in evidence. The two girls were besought until they consented to stay for the remainder of the Convention. A self appointed body-guard of six men, besides Craig, forthwith escorted them to their hotel dining room for dinner.

The President of the local Trades' Council, among the men, stopped at the desk to notify the clerk that Misses Carroll and Bingham were to be considered as the Council's guests. Every wish and need was anticipated with a truly exquisite courtesy, and a warm friendliness. There was one particularly charming chap—gracious, urbane, courteous, a gentleman to the manner born, and when Nancy, in the lobby before dinner, questioned Walter Stone about him, *sotto voce*, she learned that he was the President of the State Bartenders' Union, leading a fight for the repeal of the "Bone Dry Law!" Yet—a "gentleman to the manner born," with the respect of the Convention.

"Apparently," she commented, in some bewilderment, to Stone, "what you do has nothing to do with what you are!"

They filed quite gaily in to dinner. Nancy and Craig managed to be left over, however, and to escape to a small table, while Clara entertained the body-guard at one near-by.

Nancy, seated across from him, propped her chin on her hands.

"V. A.," she said humbly, but with a glimmer of laughter in her face—"V. A., I'll bring you the proof of that bill next week to amend."

"Needn't bother," he replied coolly. "I have other plans for it." And he let her wonder.

"Well!" he observed, in a minute. "Old man Protheroe gave us a run for our money, this afternoon, didn't he?"

"*Protheroe?*" Nancy was so startled that she knocked over a glass of water. "*Protheroe?*" she repeated, aghast.

"Even so," he responded. "Mean to say you didn't suspect?" He tapped his forehead, sadly, grinning at her. "Ab-so-lute-ly *nobody* home at your house, my child!"

"Go on and tell me, V. A.," she ordered, breathless.

"Nothin' to tell. Got no evidence, but I don't happen to need any. Tom Sanderson," he said, "didn't know charities from corrections till Protheroe told him. And Tom's got no ground for a grudge against *me*. Good Lord! I kept him out of the Poor House for three months, winter before last, when he and his wife were both down with pneumonia. He wouldn't have had sense enough, either, in a thousand years, to steer that bill cross-wise of the fight that was scheduled to come on me." He shook his head. "Tom was bought and paid for. That's all there is to *that!*"

Nancy was gleeful. "And we licked him!" She meant Protheroe.

"Yes, but look what you let *me* in for," aggrievedly, "when I was keepin' clear by the hardest. And all over a bloomin' bill I don't even—well, of that anon, as the story books say. But don't you go be *too* happy, now," he warned. "Jim's like a poker hand—never know what you'll draw next."

"That just makes it exciting," she maintained, shining-eyed.

"Humph! Excitin' as doin' the loop-the-loop with the straps loose and wonderin' where you'll land." He was entirely unromantic about it.

But Nancy, with triumph in her eye, was ready for the next deal.

CHAPTER XVIII

V. A. CRAIG, LAWGIVER

THE ripple from the Public Welfare Bill's splash into the stormy waters of the Labor Convention would spread far, Nancy had been sure. She had rather imagined that some sort of state-wide furore would result—with various organizations and notables, everywhere, taking sides and writing letters to editors and legislators. To her amazement nothing whatever happened. The *Chronicle*, the only Big Bend newspaper with a State circulation, carried a ten-line summary of her speech in its daily record of the Convention proceedings—when she had sat up half the night—while there, to type varied interviews and “stories” for four different and gallant reporters!

Apparently nobody was even interested, much less excited over her bill—nobody except Jim Protheroe, that is, who (“thank Fortune!” she thought) had, since November 1st, ceased to be her Juvenile Court Judge.

Nancy decided she'd “*make* people interested whether they wanted to be or not!” As a start she hunted down Carl Billings, her friend on the Carrollton Post, and they worked out a series of

beautiful and incendiary news releases, to cover the next few months,—not too incendiary, but with just a dash of dynamite here and there. She was to furnish leads as news “broke” from time to time. Billings had a “pal” on the *Chronicle* staff and guaranteed to “make him take a raft of stuff,” at the proper times.

Nancy did not dare tell the reporter that if things came to a show down in the Legislature they had decided to play every trump card they had—she and her Board back of her—and plaster the *Post's* front pages with the affidavits and testimony concerning Protheroe's convict camp and the Poor House, and with the crooked, misrepresenting petition he had attempted to have circulated in District 21, also with every other damaging and hitherto suppressed document upon which they could lay their hands. For her Board was as thoroughly “riled” about the whole business as she was. Mr. Payne, to be sure, was, very uncharacteristically and curiously, not in favor of such a radical course, but the others were, to a member.

Carl's reportorial instincts, Nancy feared, might get the better of his gentlemanly efforts to respect her confidences, so she contented herself with laughingly naming him her special correspondent and assigning him to the Board's legislative committee, whose chairman was Mr. Payne and of which the Circuit Judge and Bob were members. And she secured Billings' promise to keep an eye continually upon the *Argus*, the absurd but fairly

successful little local sheet that was always Protheroe's stanch supporter and that he was rumored to own.

Then Nancy began to line up various other kinds of potential support. First, last, and always, there was Clara Bingham. One afternoon Clara came into her office with the calm announcement: "Nancy, you behold a stricken woman. I am fired."

"Not really?" Nancy was both horrified and remorseful.

"No, not really, but substantially. My boss told me sweetly a while ago that with the uncertainty about whether the district was going to be formed into a special one by the Legislature, 'and all,'—I like that 'and all,' don't you?—the directors thought maybe they'd better not reëngage me yet for the term after this. I wanted to tell him I thought he and I were in the same boat—both in our last terms, but I only said to him, crushingly, that unless engaged now I should probably not be available later.

"So it's up to you, Nancy, having got me fired with all your goings on, to make my bluff good. In other words I want a job, Lady,"—she held out her hand with the mendicant's whine and a laugh in her eyes. "You kin make out me case record, Ma'am, if you like."

"Sure, I'll get you a job," Nancy said, with ungrammatical energy. "You can typewrite and do shorthand, can't you?"

"I could. I went to Business College in the days of my youth."

"Go some more and study up, and we'll make you clerical and office worker for the Public Welfare Commission, when created. We don't know what staff officers there'll be when the Legislature gets through whacking our appropriation, but there's bound to be one position like that for a woman. Do it, Clara."

But the latter needed no urging.

"Smart girl, Clara," Nancy remarked to Mrs. Burns, when she had left them. "Good head. Discovered a remote married cousin up at Big Bend recently and now they're friends for life. Result: Clara stays with Cousin from January 2nd to March 2nd, the whole term, if necessary, and I stay with Clara. See? Oh! I may pay her some board," indulgently; "depends on how my Board behaves as to how profitable a boarder I'll be. Listen to all the puns I'm making!"

She seized her hat, in a moment, with a glance at her watch, and proceeded straightway to one of the "Whoop 'em up" meetings, as she inelegantly termed them, which she was engineering to rouse the requisite enthusiasm in the town and which were simply all kinds of regular meetings where Nancy was making the same kind of talks.

After adjournment, she strolled by the Methodist Parsonage, hoping to find Mr. Payne. At the curb stood Bob's car, and, rather surprised, Nancy clanged the front-door knocker and was

shown into Mr. Payne's study. The two men, whose chairs were close together, looked up, startled, from what was obviously an agitating conversation, for Bob's face was like a thunder cloud and Mr. Payne's was serious and perturbed. In one of the flashes of intuition that people have, sometimes, Nancy knew at once that they had been talking about her. They stopped abruptly and with a very obvious effort became cheerful and jocular again.

She stayed only a few minutes, and, outside, seating herself in the car, informed Bob that he was to take her for a drive because she particularly wanted to talk to him.

It was quite evident that he wasn't nearly as anxious to talk to her, but he obeyed, rather absent-mindedly, heading for the river road. Nancy found, pretty soon, that she was making no progress whatever with the adroit and casual queries she was interspersing in the conversation, so she abandoned her tack, temporarily, and, once on the road, began on the sunset, which was a great flaming wintry affair, crimsoning the placid river with its snow-patched banks. Then they drove along in silence for a bit, Bob still in his dour, abstracted mood.

"You know," observed Nancy, in a moment, *a propos* of nothing. "I'm just spending my days whistling to keep my courage up. I'm really scared to death of that Legislature and not nearly as cocksure as I pretend to be, whooping things

up around here like a revival. I dread it, Bob—all those strange men, who'll be bored or busy or suspicious or otherwise horrid. And people tell such tales of the Legislature."

"Exactly," he said, with emphasis, waking up. "You've spoken right into my mind, Nancy. I——"

"So that *was* it!" she cried in triumph, and she twisted forward to smile up teasingly into his face, trying in vain for an answering smile.

He was doggedly silent, eyes on the wheel.

"Don't be cross with me," she begged. "I just *had* to know what you and Mr. Payne were talking about." He smiled queerly, in the darkness that was deepening so fast. "And I do mean all I said."

"Then why do you go? Why stand the brunt as you're planning to? What's your Legislative Committee for? What'll Dr. Gunnell and all those men in your Conference be doing? It's no woman's game, subjecting yourself, like that, to all sorts of ——"

She stopped him with a counter thrust. "And why are you just suddenly seeing all this? You haven't, before. You agreed with me when I said that if you 'want a thing well done you must do it yourself.' The Conference will split a hundred ways when it comes to the scratch. It'll be every fellow for his own bills. Dr. Gunnell's a wonder—he's done the real work on the bill, but he's the busiest man I ever saw and no politician. V. A.'s

hipped on labor. There you are. You've let Mr. Payne talk woman's sphere and the conventions to you, Bob. "What?" for he had muttered something angrily, under his breath.

"Listen," she said gently, after a time and in a different tone. "This isn't just a question of passing a difficult bill and putting one scoundrel out of business. We're representatives, of a constituency, Bob. V. A. said it once and it's true. We're sent up—elected—to do this thing for a voiceless multitude which is suffering, right now—to-night. Of *course* I'm scared, and hate the thought of it, sometimes, though it thrills me other times," she added, honestly, "but when I get real scared, Bob, I just open the filing cabinet and read case records, and I go out to that wretched Poor House with that brainless brute of a Reynolds still in charge—hanging on—or I just sit and do some thinking, maybe, and pretty soon my blood's at the boiling point again, and I'm ready for fire and slaughter!"

She looked at him pleadingly. "If you'll *just* help me, Bob dear, as we've planned all along—come up lots to tackle the worst ones and use your car, and everything—why it won't be nearly as bad as I'm imagining, and——"

"I can't," he broke in, as though the words were jerked from him. "I—er—I'm a dub at politics, Nancy—too downright or something. I wouldn't be a bit of help to you." She was staring at him in a startled bewilderment that was rapidly becoming

anger. "And I still think you're making a mistake to take such a prominent part yourself and not to get a strong committee of men, and——"

"Fortunately," said Nancy, with a sweetness which was iced, "what you think will have no effect whatever upon our plans. Don't you think it's getting rather late and we'd better be going home?"

He made no reply, except a scowl, as he turned the car.

Her chief feeling, after he had left her at her doorstep, was a bruised and battered one of incredulity. Her perplexity would have deepened if she could have overheard the remark he addressed, presumably, to his steering-wheel, on departing—a remark which, on the other hand, was one no lady *should* have overheard. The look upon his face was murderous, no less, and it was just as well that certain individuals did not cross his road as he swung savagely homeward.

But Nancy, sunk in a chair in her living room, was thinking, with the bitterest smile her lips had yet known: "If that big clock in the hall had said to me, 'Nancy, I'm tired of telling the time. I don't think I will, any more!' I would not have been as stunned as this. Bob! *My* Bob! Now, I *am* alone."

It was the day after Christmas before Nancy felt that things were in good enough shape to leave. She had arranged for stenographic help for Molly Burns, left a beaming Alice with Miss Lætitia,

finished with her finance campaign and Christmas orgy of work, secured her blanket leave of absence from the Board and bade Mr. Payne and Bob a cool farewell, in complete contrast with the warmth of her goodbye to everyone else. She felt, somehow, absurdly, as if she were off upon a crusade or pilgrimage to strange and formidable heathen shores, but Clara's jubilant anticipations were consoling.

Once in Big Bend, Clara, the baggage, and a taxi proceeded to her Cousin's, while Nancy, feeling that enough precious time had been wasted, already, went directly to the Labor Federation office, V. A. Craig's legislative headquarters in a building across the street from the Capitol. He, too, was on leave from his job to handle the Federation's slate of bills.

She waited, in an inner office, until he had disposed of some half dozen hilarious visitors—probably legislators, as a vanguard—the steps and porticoes of the immense and nobly beautiful building opposite were alive with men, and they couldn't all be Statehouse officials, she decided.

"Well, what's on your mind?" He greeted her, smiling, with his little stock phrase.

"This," she said, waving at him the exquisite sample of the printer's art that the Public Welfare Bill was.

He groaned, to her annoyance, leafed it through superficially and laid it upon a table, remarking rudely: "It can wait. Now, just exactly what have you come to me for?"

"Advice."

"Advice or agreement? Agreement's what women usually want."

"Advice, I told you. I'm suddenly realizing that I am now up against something about which I know precisely nothing."

"All right," he said curtly. He grasped the printed bill, and leaning forward looked her in the eyes. "Now you get a nice, big packing case, he directed, leisurely, "and you put all these in it," he fluttered the bill, "and put it down in Dr. Gunnell's cellar, and then forget about it. See?"

"Oh!" cried Nancy. "You don't know—Why! the biggest authorities in the United States have passed on that bill—why!——"

"They said it was a 'model' didn't they? Said it was 'perfect'?"

"They most certainly did," hotly, "they——"

"Exactly," he interrupted her. "It's so perfect it would live about ten minutes in that Legislature. The climate would be so unhealthy for it, it'd 'jest natchelly' lay down and *die*, and go to heaven, where it belongs!"

Nancy was too agitated to smile.

"You don't believe me, do you?" he asked.

"I—I don't think I do, V. A."

He got up from his seat and opened the door, into the adjoining office. "Cal," he called disrespectfully to the old Federation Secretary within, "You've afflicted that Solon long enough. Come

on in here, Senator, and talk to some people worth talkin' to."

A big, good-looking man appeared in the doorway, smiling, and was presented as Senator Wayne, "who's goin' to be President of the Senate," interjected Craig, "if I'm any weather prophet. Miss Carroll," he added, "is a friend of organized labor."

"Organized labor is very lucky," observed the Senator, without marked originality, and with a rather direct glance.

For some fifteen minutes he and Craig gossiped jocularly about "hold-overs" and "caucuses" and the like, with an occasional word of explanation to Nancy, and then Craig inquired casually, "You all been gettin' the usual tons of advance literature, I suppose?"

"Oh! yes," replied Wayne indifferently, "but you don't have to read the truck, you know."

"Did you get one of these, by any chance?" Craig blandly held out the Public Welfare bill. "I was just showin' it to Miss Carroll. She hadn't seen one."

Wayne took it. "No," he answered. "I seem to have escaped this." He studied it. "Holy Smoke, V. A., is this a *bill*?"

Nancy writhed.

"Sorter voluminous, ain't it?" Craig grinned.

"Humph! We'd have a walkout of clerks on the first reading, I'm thinking." He flipped over a page, perusing it sketchily. "Looks like a Ph.D. treatise, don't it? I saw one once"—good-naturedly,

to Nancy, who tried to smile. "Nearest I ever came to a degree."

The Senator reexamined the bill curiously, as he might have gazed, for instance, upon a cuneiform inscription, but after a few moments gave it up, and laid the pamphlet upon the table, observing cryptically, "Graveyard."

When Craig had finally shut the door upon the gentleman, he faced about.

"Well!" said Nancy, managing a very presentable smile over the grave of her summer, "the packing case—then what?"

"You poor, game little kid!" Craig was laughing at her, but there was a rare, brief trace of tenderness in his eyes and voice. "Don't look so down in the mouth, and heroic!" He chuckled. "You haven't lost your last friend, you know." ("I've come pretty near it," thought Nancy, bitterly.) "Now that you've got that old bill of yours all out of your stubborn little system at last, we're goin' to draft us a 'sho'-nuff' *good* bill, right now. Cheer up!"

But he was the one who wrote it, tapping it out on the typewriter with two fingers, between forays on the book-cases for statutes and digests, while the model bill lay in state, in undisturbed peace, upon the table.

An hour later he handed her three neat typewritten pages, and leaned back, lighting his perennial and villainous black stogy to peruse one of his copies.

Nancy read it four times and even then she was uneasily sure she had missed about half of it. It was the most innocuous, simple-seeing document. There weren't any disagreeable words like "investigate," and "abolition," although there were a lot like "coöperation" and "constructive." Crude, mercenary details like those of the appropriation clauses had been cut to a sentence. So had the appropriation.

"But," Craig commented, "we might as well cut as they, you see. This will leave enough, anyhow, for running expenses, salary of Clara Bingham, salary of you as Field Secretary,"—there was a smothered sound of negation from Nancy—"and salary of man Executive Secretary."

"You," she suggested, vindictively, on the principle of an eye for an eye.

"God forbid!" He shuddered at the bare thought. "But *you've got* to get into it, young lady, or it'll flash in the pan, sure."

"I won't," said Nancy, decidedly. "I positively won't! I don't want it. I——"

"There, there," he spoke soothingly, "finish reading the bill, like a good little girl."

She had, long since, but she studied it still another time. It was so very clever. It seemed a helpful, praiseworthy little affair, that was one's chief impression. And every sentence, every phrase was loaded. Under it, by an inferential clause, the convict and pauper lease systems would be wiped clean from the State's shield at a stroke;

the whole machinery of the State and county citizen boards was authorized, but the Penitentiary's powers were let strictly alone; that was the main omission among many.

"Your Commission will take care of all that, eventually," explained Craig. "Give 'em enough years and they'll even work up to *that*," pointing to the discarded—or perhaps postponed—master-piece upon the table.

Nancy was deep in his bill. "It's a wonder," she commented at last, looking up from the page, radiant, "and so are you." (There was at least one man left to trust, then—one support that was not going to crash to the ground.)

But he frowned impatiently. "Cut that out right here and now," he commanded. "This bill has about one chance in five hundred to pass, with Protheroe in the Senate, did you know that? Go in with your eyes shut, havin' joyful hysterics like that and you'll lose *it*."

"Yessir," said Nancy, submissively, but with a gleam still unsuppressed. "I'll take my orders and ten commandments and things, now, please."

Some minutes later, when he had outlined an entire campaign with the terse brevity which was habitual, Craig said, in an odd embarrassment: "One word more—and don't you misunderstand it," hastily. "You've got to get acquainted with all these one hundred thirty-five men—no way around it. I can't flip the trick without you, tied up the way I am. Otherwise I would, and send

you home, where you belong," with severity. "Now, there'll be all kinds of men in that Assembly, and what's more, all kinds of women. Just remember all the time that a small—I grant you—but select bunch of rotters, who don't know you from Eve, will be watchin' you every day, wonderin' what kind *you* are." Nancy's face was a study. "And they'll go just as far as they dare to find out, but you——

"Oh! the devil," he broke off, irritably. "I can't tell you how to handle men if you don't know, and if you do I don't need to, so what am I wastin' all this breath for? But the point is," he reverted inconsistently, "that in Carrollton you could stand on your head—and you pretty nearly do—on top of the Court House tower, if you wanted to, just because you're Miss Nancy Carroll. But up here you're Miss Nancy Nobody and you've got to act the part or be let in for some mighty disagreeable experiences."

He stopped, regarding her with a worried scowl. "Don't ever accept a social engagement with anybody you are not absolutely sure of," emphatically, "and keep Clara Bingham around all the time, can't you? She's a nice, plain, respectable lookin' somebody."

Nancy was between a gasp and a laugh.

"Well!" he said defensively, when the laugh won. "You're so *darned* attractive." It was not a compliment, it was a statement of liability.

"I don't believe half of all that, you know,"

Nancy told him, amusedly. "Men are lots decen-ter than they are rotten—especially if you're expecting decency of them. I mean to expect it—and get it, uniformly. Why! look at your Labor Convention crowd, V. A., and how they swung around, finally, to chivalry and the right thing."

He shook his head. "They are children compared with this bunch," he declared. "There's nothin' childlike about the State Legislature, you'll find, and Protheroe'll be watchin' your every move, like an old buzzard——"

"*Stop* croaking!" Nancy rose gaily. "I don't exactly see myself in the sensational rôle of *femme incomprise*, V. A. Craig."

His eyes were on her brilliant, laughing young face and the careless, graceful poise of her. Again he frowned, dubiously. "I don't think you know very much about some kinds of men," he remarked. "There are a lot of things you don't under—" But she had thrown up one hand as if to fend off a blow.

"Not that," she said. "Say anything else, V. A."

It was about ten days later when Nancy, coming down the marble-lined corridor to the Labor Commissioner's office in the Capitol in search of Craig, thought she saw, far ahead of her on the other side of a small group of men, Bob Singleton, walking in the opposite direction. He turned so quickly at a stairway that she could not be sure. And Craig, when she asked him about it, seemed greatly surprised.

"Bob?" he asked. "Darn his old soul," affectionately. "Wish he would come up here to see me."

"No danger," said Nancy curtly. "He might have to do a little work if he came."

She moved away and stared out of a window, with her eyes full of surprising and angry tears. Craig, behind her, was smiling. But his face was seriously attentive when she turned to make her report of progress. She and Clara were already on the trail of a standing Prisons Committee, just appointed. All their work had been held up pending the appointment of this Committee. She asked her questions succinctly, got Craig's suggestions, and took her departure.

He picked up his telephone and called a number. In about a quarter of an hour one Senator Heflin walked in.

"Heflin," Craig began. "Your seat's next but one to Jim Protheroe's, ain't it?" The other nodded. "How well do you know him?"

"As well as I want to," stated Heflin, somewhat grimly.

"Heflin," Craig said, again, "who put you in the Senate?"

"You did." He was tacitly representing organized labor.

"Well, here's your chance to pay me in full. I want you to get closer to Jim Protheroe than the coat on his back." He talked rapidly for several moments.

"The hell you say!" exclaimed Heflin, startled. "That pretty little lady who was at the Convention?"

"The same."

"Why!" said the Senator, with some indignation, remembering the form of Craig's request. "You go on off and be damned, V. A. I'll do it for the little lady—you don't come into this at all."

Craig laughed. "Do it for Beelzebub—just so you do it."

"What's he up here for, V. A.—Protheroe?"

"That's another little thing you might find out, while you're about it."

And Heflin, looking straight at him, nodded slowly, with comprehension in his eyes and purpose in the set of a very good, hard, square chin.

CHAPTER XIX

THE NO'S HAVE IT

"MISTER Speaker! Mister SPEAKER!!!"

Nancy counted seven, no eight,—nine, men springing up like Jacks in the Box in all parts of the huge, noisy House Chamber, to clamor frenziedly for recognition.

From her "courtesy" seat on the curving back row, next to a Carrollton representative, she was watching one of the men keenly. He was Ed Bolingbroke, of Big Bend, and he was waving his right arm at the Speaker's desk with the motion of one flagging an express train, and shouting with the others: "Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker! Like to call up House Bill 79. Third reading and final passage. Privilege bill, Mr. Speaker! Mr. SPEAKER!!!"

House Bill 79 was the Public Welfare Bill, with the stamp of both Prisons and Budget Committee upon it, just out of committee, after two weeks of desperate lobbying, with the recommendation that "it do pass."

Nancy, tense, caught her breath sharply as the Speaker's eyes wandered toward the row from which Bolingbroke leaned, imploring. Clara, at

her side, was gripping a newspaper so hard that it shook a little. The Speaker's eyes began on a return journey to the other side, a vociferous old "gentlemen from Powell," was recognized, calling up a long-winded bill about the eradication of cattle-ticks, and Nancy and Clara, with a disgusted low-toned interchange of opinion as to the relative value of cattle-ticks and human beings in the eyes of legislators, leaned back again, relaxing. There was still time for ample consideration of the bill before noon, once on the floor.

It had been like that for three days now—a hair-trigger, ragged-edge feeling that any minute their bill would be hurled into the arena to fight for its life on final reading. Half of the sixty day session was gone. Gone up in shouting and fury and verbal fireworks, with a very small precipitate in the form of enacted law. In the meantime the wheels were clogged with local bills—by the dozens. Nancy heaved a sigh, as she wearily turned the printed pages of her calendar.

But there was one local bill with which those wheels were not clogged, she reflected triumphantly, in a moment. The Carrollton House delegation had succeeded in ignominiously tabling Protheroe's Senate bill to create his special school district. A nice finishing touch had been given the affair by V. A.'s report that "the old man was mad enough to choke!"

It was about all, though—that successful motion to table—that she and Clara had to show for one

month's work, Nancy thought, now, somewhat dejectedly. Except a remarkable system of applied psychology. They had improved upon V. A.'s "ten commandments" by the addition of others, such as, eleventh: "never bore your man"; twelfth: "meet him on his own ground—not yours," and so forth.

Craig had come upon Nancy, one afternoon, earnestly practicing Commandment 12. She was discussing with an acidulated, suspicious-minded, and universally disliked old farmer from up state, the value and efficacy of commercial versus barnyard fertilizer in the growing of tomatoes according to Government bulletin. They were, seemingly, having a very pleasant and even stirring time. There was no hint of Public Welfare in the air for yards around.

"Now, who's the Jesuit?" he demanded, when the old fellow had departed, actually smiling.

"Not I!" maintained Nancy stoutly. "He wasn't interested in Public Welfare but he was in tomatoes. So was I—yes, really and truly," in response to his skeptical look—"therefore we talked 'em. *Now* he thinks that, if I have that much sense about tomatoes, I must have some about Public Welfare, too, and maybe my bill's not such a bad thing, after all. Q. E. D. See?"

He shook his head. "I make it a rule never to try to understand anything a woman says or does. Saves wear and tear of nervous tissue."

Nancy had laughed, and made a face at him.

"Humph! Jealous because I'm such a *grand* lobbyist!"

But she did not feel like such a "grand" lobbyist, or a "grand" anything else, as she and Clara sat there, in the physically and mentally overheated atmosphere of the House, half-hearing the droning voice of the Clerk, reading the cattle-tick bill, and praying that Bolingbroke would get his chance at the floor, yet horribly afraid he would—fuming at the delay, but frightened at the prospect of a sudden end to it. They were still in a state of racking doubt, even with more than their necessary two thirds majority checked in the Aye column.

Some of the representatives had been so glib with their promises. That worried Nancy greatly. She got out her checked roll-call, and went down the list. (The voice of some debater on the cattle-tick measure had succeeded the Clerk's.)

"Drat Protheroe, anyhow," she thought, with his daily increasing influence in the Senate. Influence in the House as well as he was bound to have, only Nancy could not uncover and track it.

That V. A. Craig knew a great deal more than he bothered to tell her, she was convinced. He would even speak non-committally over the telephone when she was sitting by him, though he ought to have been sure by now, she thought, that she knew how to hold her tongue. (Nancy did not guess that about half of those telephoned conversations were with Mr. Payne, speaking from

Carrollton, or Bob Singleton, calling up for his semi-weekly bulletin from the front.)

And then, too, he hardly had opportunity to talk to her, she supposed, he was so fearfully busy all the time; running about six rings of his labor circus at once; up until two or three o'clock every night, by confession, playing hilarious poker and drinking "boot-leg" beer with his "victims," by way of tactics, when not wrangling with them in night committee meetings.

They were calling the roll on the cattle-tick bill. Nancy looked around. Clara poked her suddenly, with an elbow. V. A. was beckoning to her from a doorway. She had not seen him since the morning of the day before. He looked hollow-eyed and exhausted, but alert, in some contradictory way. He motioned her outside into the empty corridor and shut the door.

"Got any idea of callin' up that bill this mawn-in'?" he asked.

"I should say so. Bolingbroke's been trying for recognition for the last hour. He may be getting it right——"

"Damnation!" he said savagely, between his shut teeth and brushed roughly past her, into the House. She followed and she heard the Speaker's voice say, "Gentleman from Greene is recognized." Greene was Bolingbroke's county. Her heart gave a frightened leap as she moved to Craig's side where he stood against a column. Nancy spoke to him and he shrugged, eyes on the Clerk who had

the bill in his hand. "Too late now," he said, "we'll have to chance it." He was making a lightening survey of the House. "Where's B. B. Campbell?"

She groaned. "In joint conference with some senators on that Bank Guaranty bill."

"Damn," he muttered, again. Campbell was the acknowledged leader of the House.

Clara came up to them with Jim Davis, a Carrollton delegate, who went on past and began unobtrusively priming their main supporters, here and there, for possible combat. The Clerk was well into the bill now, droning away, and Bolingbroke, leaning forward, looked ready for anything.

"Old Peach!" murmured Clara, gratefully, her eyes on him.

But Nancy had gripped Craig's arm. "What's the matter, V. A.? What have you heard?" She was insistent. "You never will tell us things and it's not fair."

He glanced around him and dropped his voice. "Friend of mine in the Senate," he told them, "was in a meetin' with Protheroe last night at the hotel. After it, went with him to another fellow's room where a whole gang was playin' poker. Funny. I had just left. Well, Protheroe and my friend stayed just twenty-five minutes and in that time he had signed up the whole crowd to a round-robin to oppose this bill. He can talk when he wants to, you know."

"What did your friend do?"

"Came and told me the first minute he could locate me, which was just now. That's all he was s'posed to do. There were twenty-one House names alone on the round-robin and it's been circulatin' in here since."

"That's enough to kill it, with the opposition we know about," Clara said quickly. "Oh, Lord!" and she studied the House with undisguised apprehension.

"What did Protheroe say to them, V. A.—what line did he take?"

"Wait about ten minutes and you'll hear what he said to 'em," Craig responded significantly. He left them, and went quickly over to Bolingbroke's place, sitting down in a vacant chair next and talking to him earnestly as the Clerk read slowly on.

Nancy called a page and he brought her blank roll-call slips, ready to record the balloting. A friendly member drifted by.

"This your bill?" he queried.

"It most certainly is. Get in your seat and fight for us."

"You bet." He smiled and moved on—to stop and chat with a leisurely group of men. Nancy, in a quiver of nervousness, could have slapped him for his amicable unconcern.

"Third reading of the bill," sing-songed the Clerk. He had finished.

"The question is, shall the bill pass," announced the Speaker. Bolingbroke was on his feet.

A few minutes later Nancy began to relax her tension and breathe normally again. He was such a convincing talker. Smoothly, forcefully, the arguments—their arguments—fell into the quiet of the House. Surely there was nothing to fear?

He sat down amid scattering applause. A Carrollton man and two others shouted for recognition. One of the latter, clear across the House from them, got it. He was a thin, wiry little man with a high, shrieking voice, by name Goddard, a noisy shyster lawyer of no consequence in or out of the House, hailing from a backwoods county. He was in Nancy's "Aye" column, with a question mark—one of the glib promisers.

She listened. The question mark faded and Goddard moved over definitely into the "No's." Clara was taking notes on the speeches on the back of a roll-call she held plastered up against their marble pillar.

"How many o' you men have read this bill?" shrieked Goddard. He did not seem to be able to speak his words, like anyone else. "That's what I want to know! This is a dangerous bill, I tell you. Do you know what this bill does? It sets up a political machine in this state that would shame Tammany Hall!"

"Aw—come off!" exclaimed a man near him and there was a good-natured laugh.

"Listen to me." Goddard's voice rose higher. "This bill creates exactly three hundred and eighty-two new state and county offices. Yes, sir!

Seven members of a 'State Commission of Public Welfare,' appointed by the Governor and five members of a Board in every one of the seventy-five counties in this state. And who appoints *them*? Why!"—sarcastically—"the State Commission. In other words, a Governor's got three-hundred and eighty-two henchmen to help elect him to Congress or anywhere else he wants to go."

Things had gotten a little quieter and more people were listening to him.

"Oh!" cried Nancy to Clara, in helpless fury. "Can't Bolingbroke shut him up?"

But Goddard went on. "Gentlemen of the House, when you hear the Clerk read this it sounds all very nice, don't it? 'Supervision' and 'developin'' and all that. And because there's a lot o' highbrows and ladies behind it and a lot o' college professors wrote it"—V. A. Craig looked around at Nancy and grinned—"in this 'Social Legislative Conference' they've got, or whatever it is they call it, why it seems it must be all right, don't it? But it ain't, I tell you!" He shrieked it. "Are we goin' on record as votin' to create three hundred and eighty-two new political offices, not countin' a paid staff for this Commission, just to give some highbrow ladies and gentlemen a job and let 'em experiment with the pore and downtrodden of this great State"—oratorically—"and try out their new-fangled theories on 'em and——"

"Will the gentleman yield to a question?" It

was Bolingbroke's steady, dignified voice. The Speaker turned toward Goddard and he nodded.

"Is the gentleman aware, first, that the members of these Boards and the Commission serve for rotating terms so that no one Governor and no one Commission can appoint a majority; and secondly, that not one of these three hundred and eighty-two 'dangerous' new office-holders will receive a cent of pay, or even postage stamps for his or her labors to improve the condition of the convicts and paupers of this 'great State' of his? That it will be a labor of love, entirely?"

"What difference does that make?" Goddard was unabashed. "Some people 'ud rather have power than pay any day in the week."

"That's so," said an old farmer solemnly, near-by.

Goddard went on. "And this'll give 'em a lot of it, Gentlemen of the House, oh! believe *me* it will!" He sailed into a clamorous analysis of this "vicious sweepin' measure!"

"Shades of Brother Sanderson," Clara whispered, satirically.

"Exactly," agreed Nancy. "Same source of inspiration. Goddard's a cipher, let alone."

But slight, disturbing applause from the section around him was beginning to punctuate his periods and he sat down, at last, amid quite a burst of it.

Things happened in a hurry, then. A Carrollton man started a speech as right as a trivet, but weak and wavering in style and it was shot full of

questions by a group of men of the "rough-neck" variety, springing up all around Goddard to hurl them. One minute Bolingbroke was master of the floor, and, the next, he and another defender of the bill, trying to speak at the same time, were being heckled and badgered by the same rowdy crew, while the Sergeant-at-Arms thundered with his mace and the angry Speaker's gavel sounded through the turmoil like the rat-tat-tat of a steam drill.

Nancy, in a veritable agony of impotence, wrung her hands, though she did not know she was doing it, straining to follow every man and every move. Goddard was shrieking something inane about "College professors," again.

"Anarchists!" said Clara, savagely. The lineup was so plain—the intelligent, upper class men against the "rough-neck" mob. "And liars" she added. There was murder in her once peaceful eye.

"No," Nancy said, some instinct of justice goading her even then. "Goddard's bought, but the rest *think* they're right. It's just ignorance—pitiful, terrible, blind ignorance—and class-feeling, coming in now."

Pretty soon there was an ominous sound. "Call the roll," a man shouted. And a few others in different parts of the House took it up—"Call the roll."

"Oh. no, no," cried Nancy, under her breath, "not yet, not *now*." She looked wildly toward Bolingbroke and Craig. The latter, turning, fin-

ally met her eyes and lifted both hands high in a gesture of defeat. "Call the roll,"—it was a deep rumble. Goddard sat down and began to yell with the rest.

"Are you ready for the question?" shouted the irate Speakers.

"*Question!*" It was roared out by some fifty men.

"The question is—*shall the bill pass?* The Clerk will call the roll."

The Clerk began his mechanical, slow, "Adams—Allen——"

"Oh! dear God," whispered Nancy, trembling. As though she had been a drowning person, faces—scenes—flashed before her eyes: Billy's as he struggled with the red-faced guard; Joseph Brannon's, wincing from the pain of his beaten back; the old man's, tortured to imbecility, staring at the ceiling; that jail in Ashtown that the woman said was a "Black Hole of Calcutta,"—an ancient negro woman, weeping on her filthy bunk at the Poor House; ah! and Protheroe's face—she set her teeth—like a thing of cold, gray granite. He'd be smiling over this, too. Oh!

She was actually forgetting to keep her roll-call. But Clara was taking votes down, one by one. Nancy watched over her shoulder. "Campbell," called the Clerk. No answer. "Carson."

"No," loudly.

"The sneaking bluffer," said Clara furiously, putting him down. Nancy almost laughed.

The Clerk got down into the L's. "No's" were beginning to be more frequent.

In a minute, "We're gone!" Clara said. She footed the totals swiftly and went on with her recording. Nancy still looked over her shoulder, numbly—dully.

There was a stir—bustle—and the Clerk's droning voice. "Total number of votes cast ninety-three—necessary for the passage of this bill sixty-two—of which the Aye's have fifty-one, and the No's have forty-two so the bill has failed to pass."

"Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker!" Four or five men were standing. "Like to call up House Bill 83," said one of them. It was all over.

Somehow, just before noon, Craig, Clara, and Nancy found themselves down on the Capitol steps. Clara, still looking entirely stunned, climbed into her cousin's car to go home, but Nancy said. "I've got to talk to you, V. A.," and he answered gruffly, "Come on to lunch then. I haven't eaten since three yesterday."

Side by side in the street-car, they said not a single word all the way downtown. Craig was slumped into a dark blue grouch, seemingly, and Nancy was too busy thinking one thing to talk: "How shall I convince him that this is *not* the end?" Strange that she required no convincing, herself, but quite true. She only felt, now, a great impatience at these stupid setbacks in the plan. She did not stop to analyze this brand new cer-

tainty of hers, which was neither faith nor hope, but more like knowledge. She was content to rest upon it.

They ordered some lunch—they ate it, she supposed, and then she leaned forward. It took her forty minutes to “get” him. But, at the end of that time, she said one thing to him which seemed to go home, at last:

“If this were a labor bill you’d never say die. Labor’s your religion. Well! this is mine.”

At that he pondered a moment, then, getting up to reach for his hat, he said, with a gleam of deviltry: “All right, Sister! I’m with you till the windup!”

They proceeded, thence, straight to the Governor’s office and kept a large delegation of bankers waiting three quarters of an hour while they and the Governor, far famed for his social legislation and sympathies, enthusiastically mapped out a new campaign.

And so it happened that four days later an astonished House sat up and listened to a warm and vigorous Governor’s message reintroducing the resurrected and chastened Public Welfare Bill, minus appropriation clause, which was, however, all ready for insertion in another general measure.

It was a hair-raising campaign—the one they had mapped. Every day or so little groups of sheepish men might be seen straggling into the Governor’s office, rounded up by his secretary, to

receive a curtain lecture from the great man upon the subject of Public Welfare.

Carl Billings kept his word and favorable comment began to seep into the *Chronicle*. Nancy wrote home to her legislative committee outlining the situation, and a really splendid joint delegation from her Board and the Rotary Club came up to the Assembly, making a profound impression in both Houses. At the crest of things her campaign money gave out and she needed more for telegrams and stenographic help. V. A. Craig promptly donated fifty dollars from the Federation's funds and all went merrily as before.

And, one fine afternoon, Nancy and Clara Bingham, with an amused Ed Bolingbroke in tow, fairly fell into Craig's office—hurtled into it—delirious with joy, to tell him that the bill had been called up "unexpectedly"—Craig smiled at that—and had just passed, practically without debate, by a landslide of 81 to 13 votes!

"I am now going home and have nervous prostration in peace and quietude," announced Clara.

"Better save it until after the Senate votes," Craig suggested, but he laughed.

It was two days later when Nancy, coming into Craig's office, which was empty, heard voices in the room adjoining and stopped, irresolute. One was Craig's, the other she did not recognize.

"Sure he's doing it," said the strange voice. "Right along. Take his vote on that drainage district bill. Must 'a netted himself a nice little sum

on that. Everybody knows it, nobody can prove it. I can't, for all my trouble. Some satisfaction to see him losing influence the way he is, but gee! V. A.," with a rueful laugh, "I'm getting *myself* gloriously talked about for sticking around him so much. I don't *give* a damn, though. I'm mad, now, and set on lickin' him!"

"Don't worry—he'll get his, eventually," Craig replied. "What about the other business?"

"Oh! he's got something up his sleeve—all right," came the answer. "Whether it's what your friend thinks I can't tell, yet. And he's mad enough for anything now, of course. He was so sure, you see," chuckling. "You'd better do as I suggest, V. A., and I'll stay on the job, too, naturally."

Was it Protheroe they meant?

"Keep it up, old man," said V. A.'s voice. "You're doin' noble," and there was a sound as if he had slapped the other approvingly upon the back.

Nancy knocked—for she really was eavesdropping. It was Senator Heflin, inside, whom she knew slightly and V. A. said, explanatorily, when the Senator left: "Poor Heflin's got some troubles of his own."

"Sounded as if they might be troubles of *my* own for a minute, out there," Nancy remarked, then she forgot it and began with her questions, but Craig stopped her before long.

"I'm goin' to exercise my authority as General-

in-Chief of this campaign," he said smiling, "and issue an order you won't like a little bit, Miss Nancy Carroll. Now the Senate," he went on, "is my private and particular stampin' ground. Everything I put over is done right there. And I know it from Ashley to Wyeth and back again. Kensequently, as the darkies say, I don't want *any* females botherin' around in there, and muddyin' up the waters. In other words, you and Clara Bingham are hereby ruled out of the Senate fight on the Public Welfare Bill, *teetotally*." He brought his fist down upon the table with decision. "It will be handled exclusively by me, about forty laborites that you've stirred up to the boilin' point, and the Governor—this in the order of our importance. Get me?"

There was nothing for Nancy to do but agree, of course, secure a promise of truthful and frequent reports of progress, smile gracefully over it and depart, in much uncertainty.

CHAPTER XX

SHOW DOWN!

BEING on the outside of the Legislature was even worse than being on the inside, Clara Bingham and Nancy definitely decided within the next ten days. Yet they had to admit that V. A. was handling the bill in the Senate to the Queen's taste. He maneuvered it through first and second reading, steered it into the Senate Prisons Committee and out again, approved, the following morning, with unheard-of celerity.

"Chairman's an old sidekicker of mine," was his only explanation.

In his desk drawer lay the promise of a second Governor's message, to be fired into the Senate at a moment's notice, if needed. But he announced cheerfully to Clara one morning: "We've got our two-thirds majority, if Protheroe don't pull some dirty work, that is, at the eleventh hour." He did not deign to particularize.

Clara was appropriately joyful, and then she said, in some perplexity: "Looks to me, Mr. Craig, as if Protheroe were just laying down on the job, suddenly. Why! he hasn't lifted a finger to fight it, so far, has he?"

"Not that I could see. But it ain't—isn't—time for him to. He'll lift several when the time comes, never you fear!"

"Why is he so violent on this thing, after all?" she asked, frowning. "Nancy and I've wondered all along. He could live, move, and have his being just the same without his old convict camp, couldn't he?"

"No," replied Craig, "not just the same, by several thousand dollars per year. And a dollar looks to Protheroe the way ten looks to me. He says his prayers to 'em. There's not a nigger in Chickasaw County, or a white man either, you see, that would work Jim's farms for him unless he was made to, by force. And Jim knows it. And he knows he can't be County Judge again, as he figured, and maybe not even school-director, thanks to you all. And he's worried—considerable. More than he lets on."

"Fine!" said Clara, inhumanly. "I'd like to worry him right on into a padded cell."

It was three days later, about eight o'clock in the morning, when Craig telephoned Clara's cousin and asked to speak to Nancy. Behind him, as he sat holding the telephone, Heflin paced up and down, muttering something now and then. He had very much the look of suppressed indignation and excitement that the animals have in the zoo about feeding time. He stopped his restless movement, abruptly, to listen.

"This is Craig—yes. Just wanted to tell you

girls that I'll be out of the office all day and tied up to-night, too, prob'ly, with a Federation Board meetin'! So don't come out—Oh! some of our stuff's in a jam, that's all. Better not come out to-morrow, either. Wait till I 'phone— Yes— G'bye."

"That'll get rid of *them*," he said, wheeling around to Heflin.

A stenographer appeared in the doorway. "You're wanted by long distance over the 'phone in the other office, Mr. Craig."

Craig came back, smiling a little. "Speak of the devil," he said.

"Your Carrollton friend?"

"Yes, and mad enough to mop up Hell. Hardly said a word when I got through, but I know that tone of voice he gets on him. I told him if he came up here I'd shoot him. Nothin' less."

"Well!" said Heflin, sitting down heavily. "You might tell *me* what to do."

Craig groaned and sat down too. "Damned if I know, Heflin," he answered unhappily. He scowled. "Always swore I'd never get mixed up in anything with a woman in it. I don't know how to handle women. They're dynamite—that's what they are. If it was all men it'd be plain sailin'. We could— What do *you* say do?"

"Well," began the other, again. "Cabot might take him on in my place. Cabot'd do a lot for me and he's in the other camp. I don't believe Protheroe'd suspect Cabot. Why in the world he

didn't suspect me long before now is more'n I know. I must have more brains than I thought."

"What did he say to you, exactly? Tell me over again."

"Said, 'Mr. Heflin, it may interest you to know that I've seen through your little game for some time. I've about decided, however, to let you justify your existence as go-between for Craig and the Carroll girl and me.' And then he whips out the stuff and shows it to me, all through, like I told you. I had some idea of choking him then and there, V. A.," reflectively, "but I remembered what you said to the other fellow and sobered down. That was all there was to it, except the thing I told you he said: 'I won't start mud-slinging until they do,' and you said you knew what he meant by that."

Craig nodded. "Yes—but what stumps me is this: If Protheroe thought he needed mud he wouldn't wait for anybody to start slingin' it first. Somehow or other he figures he's got that bill defeated *anyway*, unless we spring a personal attack on him, which we can easily do, and all he's tryin' to do with this latest stall is to bluff us out of springin' *that*. Matter of fact, though, Heflin, he's licked right now. We've got that majority sewed up in a sack. And he's smart enough to know it, too. He's *bound* to know it." He knit his brows perplexedly.

"*Now's* the time for his mud, from his point of view. Then what the devil does he want to agree

to wait, for, and let us take the bill right on to a vote, as he practically said—unless he's a bigger damn fool than I take him for, or just plain lyin'."

"He wasn't," Heflin stated positively. "I'll stake my head on it. He intends to wait. 'Course he could change his mind, though. That's where Cabot would come in."

"Oh! get Cabot, of course," impatiently. "But it beats *me*—" Craig got up and began likewise to imitate the animals at the zoo.

"Well, are you going to hold up on the bill a while, V. A.—that's what I——"

"Hold up, hell!" Craig blazed around at him. "Man, *invite* me to go to the bat with him in so many words and I hold *up* on it? Not hardly! Not so you'd notice it!" He began to pace up and down again. "That bill's on the calendar. MacPherson's got instructions to call it up any time he's got his majority present. That stays. And if Protheroe don't look out he's going to be wakin' up the evenin' after, wonderin' what hit him.

"Now, tell you what you do," he leaned upon the table, closer to Heflin. "I've got to beat it. Be tied up all day and most of the night, maybe. But you get Cabot down here, see?—and fix things up. Make him swear he won't let Jim out of his sight. Make him—oh! you know what to tell him. But he ought to act on the theory Protheroe's lyin' to us, which I believe he is. Cabot may get the dope, he may not—ten to one he won't—either way don't matter if we can *lam* that bill

over home plate before Jim knows what's up. Here"—he sat down and hastily scribbled a note—"take this to MacPherson." He grinned. "No, send this to MacPherson. Mac thinks you're a Protheroe man. We'll straighten him out later." He seized his hat and struggled into his overcoat. "Bye." He was gone.

Nancy was at the dinner table, that evening, when the maid whispered to her that she was "wanted at the 'phone."

"Miss Carroll? Miss Nancy Carroll?" said a voice. "This is Jasper Heflin—Senator Heflin, you know. Do you happen to know where I can locate V. A. Craig? Thought he might have called you——"

"I haven't heard from him since early this morning," Nancy told him. "But he had a Federation——"

"I know," Heflin broke in, hastily. He seemed rather impatient and hurried. "But they don't know where he's gone, at the Federation office. Meeting was over, early. I've called twenty places, I guess." He paused. "You going to be there all evening?"

"No," she replied. "I have a theater party on. I'm sorry. Is there something I could do? What did you say?" For he had mumbled a word or two. He was quiet for so long, then, that she thought they were disconnected and said "Hello—Hello!"

"I was just thinking, Miss Carroll. I guess I'd

better tell you about something, in case V. A. calls you and I don't get him. He's such a crazy night owl—sleeps a different place every night and blows in at the Statehouse just any old time."

"I know," she laughed.

"I—er—I've been interested in your legislation."

"Yes?" Nancy was eager.

"Well—Senator MacPherson, who has your bill, told another Senator—friend of mine—that he had things fixed with the President and members to call up the bill right after morning hour, tomorrow, for passage."

"Fine," cried Nancy.

"No'm, it isn't. That's what I want you to tell Craig, please, Miss Carroll. Listen. This same friend of mine has been reliably informed that Jim Protheroe will send up an amendment exempting Chickasaw County from the provisions of the bill."

"What?" Nancy was thunderstruck. "I never heard of such a thing. Is it legal?"

"Yes'm, it's legal, all right. It hasn't been done for years and years," he explained, "because of efforts of one or two back governors against it. But there're bills on the statue books right now with as many as thirty counties exempted.

"Now, listen, Miss Carroll," as she began to say something. "That's not all. He has got eight more Senators—Protheroe has, I mean—who will do the same thing right after he does, and it's just as apt as not to start a stampede by counties. You tell V. A. exactly that, will you?"

"Oh! but would it start a stampede, Mr. Hefin?"—agitatedly. "Why would it? There's a big majority for the bill."

"I don't know why," he sounded almost irritable. "But it always has. Good way to dodge responsibility, maybe. The county officials back home don't want this bill, Miss Carroll. They're afraid of it because they don't understand it. You know that. And the Legislators know it, too. V. A. may not have told you, but he and the Governor have put this over in the Senate on sheer prestige and politics—it's known as the Governor's bill. I *know*. I'm in there. I've helped some, because *I'm* for it, strong."

"You're perfectly splendid," Nancy said gratefully. "And I'm worrying you. I'm sorry. I can't thank you enough, Mr. Hefin. Let me be sure I've got it down right." She repeated.

"That's it. Now, one thing more. Just in case neither of us finds V. A. can you be outside the Senate chamber at 8:30 sharp to-morrow morning? Well—send a note in to MacPherson. Do you know him? No? Then tell him who you are and get him to postpone calling up the bill. If he asks too many questions refer him to Senator Cabot. But not to *me*, please ma'am—for reasons. Will you do that without fail, Miss Carroll?"

"Yes," she agreed, "and I thank you with all my heart."

"Oh, that's all right. Glad to be of assis—" he had hung up.

Nancy sat motionless in a hall chair for exactly five minutes. It was the most strenuous five minutes she had ever spent, mentally speaking. At the end of that time she put in a long distance call for Molly Burns in Carrollton, after leaving word at five places that Mr. Craig was to telephone or call at the Imperial Theater for Miss Carroll after 8:15.

She consumed the rest of her dinner fitfully, between false alarms at the telephone. But finally Molly's nice, calm voice said, "Yes, Nancy?"

"Get your shorthand tablet and pencil, will you?" Nancy asked, and when Mrs. Burns returned to the 'phone, "Molly, take this down. It explains itself."

She dictated slowly, coolly, a letter, upon the subject of Protheroe and his penal and pauper system, designed to crisp the hair of every one of thirty-five state senators on the following morning. "Now," she directed, finishing, "get the signatures of every member of our Board's legislative Committee, and write in their titles,—Circuit Judge, Minister M. E. Church, and so forth. They've agreed to it once—*make 'em sign*. Get a taxi and go to their houses, if necessary. If Bob weren't so—well—put in, where I indicated, the excerpts from Billy's testimony and Joe Brannon's and Mr. Payne's affidavits, just as we blue pencilled 'em, you know, before I left." She had only copies with her.

"Now Molly," urgently, "get those letters on

the one o'clock train. They'll be in the first delivery here, in the morning." She stopped, thinking. "Wait, Molly—I can't give you the Senator's names after all. V. A.'s managing the Senate, and I can't butt in rough-shod, like this. Mail them all in a batch on that train, special delivery, to him, instead, for distribution by hand, you see. And I'll get hold of him, meantime, and explain. Now, read it to me, Honey."

"Great!" she said, at the end of it, "if I did write it. Be sure to keep a copy for the *Post* and I'll get V. A. to authorize Carl Billings by 'phone to-morrow to get it from you and use it in *Post* and *Chronicle*. I'm thinking," she added in a tone of rather wicked satisfaction, "that we're in the way to make a certain Senator sorry he ever heard the words 'county exemption.' If you happen to want me for any more suggestions or anything I'll be at the Imperial Theater in half an hour."

She rang off and jubilantly took the stairs two at a time to find Clara, who was dressing in her room.

They proceeded to the theater in a state of elation—she and Clara—or perhaps inflation would be the better word.

"Got him, dead to rights!" said Nancy, gloatingly, in the language of the wild and uncouth West. "And I have no more compunctions than I'd have in smashing a spider," she added.

"Same here," remarked Clara. They were in an exceedingly cheerful and harmonious frame of mind.

Nancy was just punctuating the end of a very dull first act with a yawn, when the lights flashed up and an usher moved down the center aisle calling: "Miss Carroll is wanted on the 'phone. Miss Carroll." She rose hastily. Long distance was on the wire. In a moment Molly Burns said to her quietly:

"Nancy? I am afraid your plan is blown up, my dear."

"*What?*"

"I called the Circuit Judge—out of town. Then I called Mr. Payne and Dr. Singleton, too, afterwards. Something's happened, Nancy. We can't use this stuff. They didn't tell me—it was over the phone—but they both said for you to see V. A. Craig at once and he would explain why. Oh! but it's something important, really," as Nancy gave a smothered exclamation. "They've been afraid it would happen from the beginning, Mr. Payne said, and now it has. They learned it by 'phone—no names mentioned, of course—this morning. You find Mr. Craig, dear, he'll explain. Let me know if there's anything I can do——"

That was all. Mrs. Burns knew not a whit more. The whole thing resolved itself, then, into a problem of finding V. A. Craig. Nancy sat on a high stool in the box office for fifteen minutes glaring murderously at the telephone. Then she returned to her seat and as soon as she sat down the usher tapped her on the shoulder. It was V. A. on the 'phone this time. She all but said "Thank God."

Yes, he had seen Heflin, and already arranged with MacPherson to hold up on the bill. Yes, he understood all about it, when she told him the Carrollton message. "Is it a good play?" he asked, with seeming irrelevance.

"No—rotten."

"I'll be right by for you," he promised.

He came in a taxi and they went home, saying little on the way. Things were going badly with his labor program. They were even trying to repeal the Child Labor Law in the House—some cotton-mill man making trouble.

He seemed very tired and dejected.

When they sat down in the "parlor" Craig looked at Nancy with the sheepish, embarrassed effort to grin of a schoolboy.

"You know," he said. "I'd rather take a beatin' than tell you this. I feel as if I'm insultin' you with every word."

It was a muddy enough little story. It began with Joe Brannon, reporting to a guard in the convict camp office, where Henry Protheroe lounged, regaling an audience with, oh! a really choice yarn about what the ferryman saw "when the two—the Doc and the girl—came over with him, lookin' for the kid, that night," embellished with winking innuendos and hints about what the "old man would do if they went to gettin' funny around *him*."

"The *ferryman*?" Nancy thought, amazed. "What in the name of—" Her mind flashed back

to that dreadful night. She felt again that chill, enveloping air, saw the sweep of blackness that the river was, beneath them. Almost in terror of it, she had gripped Bob's arm—hadn't she?—laid her cheek against his shoulder—done something like that? And that grumbling old ferryman had told Protheroe—! Ridiculous! But Craig was going on——

Brannon, it seemed, in quite a chivalrous indignation, after his first sight of Nancy, had told Mr. Payne.

"I—see," said Nancy, at this point, wide-eyed.

Then Mr. Payne had been afraid, naturally, of what Protheroe might do if Nancy were openly leading the fight against him, and had begged Bob Singleton to use his "influence" with her to stop that, and put others to the fore. But he, Craig, had known the need for her active work and the impossibility, anyway, of keeping her out of it, and had told Bob as much.

"Bob came up here to see me right off," Craig related.

Nancy was nodding her head slowly. "And you said he didn't," she inserted. He only smiled and went on.

"And I had to laugh, at the face on him. Bob was for horsewhippin' Protheroe at once, of course," sarcastically, "on the Capitol steps, most likely, with joyful *Chronicle* reporters snappin' him from the sidewalk! I told him to go home—leave—vamoose, immediately if not sooner. I told him

if he so much as came near you durin' the session I would shoot on sight. Crazy Indian!

"I've had Protheroe covered from that day to this," he continued. And then an irritated embarrassment seemed to engulf him again. "He finally got on to my man and then he showed him, for my benefit, mostly, a lot of filthy stuff," shamefacedly, "proof of a news article all full of nasty slurs and insinuations—for that damned little one-horse paper he's got in Carrollton."

"But," began Nancy.

He went on in haste: "And he had a fool affidavit from the ferryman, and another—a phoney one—all lies from start to finish, of course—from a guard at the camp, name of Reynolds, as to what *he* saw out there that night watchin' you and Bob, before Protheroe came out of the mess-house, and so on!" He glanced apprehensively at Nancy.

But to his utter amazement she was struggling with an unmistakable—*laugh!*

He looked a trifle alarmed for a moment. Poor man, he had dim fear of hysterics—fainting fit, maybe. He knew so little about the unfamiliar species.

Nancy was laughing in his face, incredulously.

"Why, it's melodrama," she said. "Movie stuff! Ten, twenty, thirty movies, at that. Where the crool villain has the baffled heroine in his power, you know. Hisses between his teeth: 'Another step and you are roined!' That kind of thing, V. A. Why—a thing like that doesn't

happen off the screen—to an eminently civilized damsel like *me!*”

“Maybe it doesn’t,” he responded gruffly, “but it has.”

She was still staring at him in amused incredulity.

“And I thought Protheroe had at least a sense of humor,” she remarked. “I did him too much honor.” Craig had not smiled. “Why, no one would believe it,” she continued argumentatively. “Say what you please, but the proportion of gentlemen to rotters in that Legislature is overwhelming.”

“Do you want them all given the chance to *see* whether they believe it or not?” He must wake her up. “Whispers goin’ around and the fool *Argus* on every desk. I told you you weren’t in Carrollton. Say one word against Protheroe, as you wanted to do to-night, and he flings the smut right onto the floor of the Senate and into the middle of Carrollton. Say nothin’, let it come to a vote, and he starts county exemption. Fool I was not to think of that. It’ll go like wild fire, Heflin’s right. And *we* can’t set a backfire. That’s the situation.”

Nancy put one hand rather bewilderedly to her temples. “I guess I’ll have to get by myself, V. A., and try to think this out. There’s a way, of course—there’s got to be. I’m glad about Mr. Payne and Bob. I—haven’t been fair to him.”

“Bob’s a pretty nice fellow,” declared Craig,

rising, "a nice—young—fellow." Nobody but himself understood his very faint sigh. "You remember the \$50 I told you I got from the Labor Federation? Well, I *didn't* get it from the Labor Federation. And he's stood over Carl Billings with a whip, Carl says, and he sent that Rotary delegation up here by main strength and awkwardness, as the sayin' is, and every time I bat an eye he's ringin' my 'phone to get the latest dope. *Awful* interested in Public Welfare, Bob is." The intense gravity of his voice was belied by his twinkling eyes.

But Nancy was too busy feeling ashamed of herself to notice.

She looked up at him, finally, where he stood, leaning against the door, and the weary droop of his shabby, thin shoulders—the defiant humor in his little twisting, tired smile smote her to the heart.

"Oh!" she said, breathing stormily—in a sudden passion of revolt. "It's not fair! Any of it. It's a damned shame! You to have to spend your brain and body and break your soul to pieces, for your under dogs, on the stupidity of this fat, smug world we've got. And because I'm a woman—and fighting, *I've* got to have that old dirty, moss-covered platitude slung at my head. It's not fair!"

"No," he agreed, "not—yet." And he looked quite through her and beyond with an odd light in his eyes.

It brought her to her feet, both hands out.

"You—you old wonder!" she cried to him, tremulously. "So it's never say die, V. A.? All right." Her eyes were on his haggard face. He looked ill. "Just wipe me right off your mind, now," she said soothingly, motherwise, "and go to bed. I'll try to climb out of this, myself. You've got enough. Now, go do as I say."

When he had gone she went upstairs, rather draggily, to her room, and sat down at a desk. She began a letter to Bob. The absurdity of the whole thing swept back over her. She wrote:

"DEAR OLD BUMBLING, BLUNDERING JUNE BUG:

"Now why shouldn't we have sat through the farce together, on the front row? *C'est à rire, Grand Sérieux!*

"Instead of which we have missed all the laughs, or at least the satiric counterfeits—and you have been entirely too noble for my now abject *amour propre!*

"At your feet, begging forgiveness, and not quite so flippant as I sound,

"NANCY."

She sealed it and threw it down into the hall for the young son of the house to mail for her. Then she got into a kimona and fussed about the room, and having done everything she could possibly think of she at last sat down reluctantly in a chair and looked the business in the eye.

She had meant what she said to V. A. Another

hair's weight and he would crumple. Bob—ruled out. She was exactly back upon herself. And she had no more idea what to do than that—that ink-well. All of which being true she most promptly went to bed, and the feminine portion of the returning theater and supper party found her quite peacefully sleeping. But she had left a note which kept Clara Bingham awake for some hours.

CHAPTER XXI

THREE MEN AND A BILL

THE next morning, early, Nancy had what she told Clara was a "preliminary idea." It was to see Senator Heflin and get more details on the "damaging" documents.

"Well, it can't do any harm," Clara damned it with faint praise.

"You might pretend it's a good idea," said Nancy, crossly, and left.

At 8:10 she was outside the Senate Chamber with a dim hope that the Senator might be an early riser and on the job. He sort of looked like that kind. Some man was, evidently. She could hear him slamming books around, it seemed, inside. In a minute she jumped as the door by which she stood, irresolute, opened wide.

Jim Protheroe stepped through it.

At the sight of him all the blood in Nancy's body rushed to her head. She confronted him.

"Mr. Protheroe," she said, "I'd like to speak to you for a moment."

"You're doing it, aren't you?"

She bit her lips, ignoring that.

"I'd like to discuss this thing with you, imper-

sonally," she began, calmly, for the hot wave had receded, now, as quickly as it had come. She felt no particular resentment toward him, curiously, only a great impatience at his wrong-headedness and a desire to show him the situation as it was—to straighten him out. He seemed to her, suddenly, just another of those blind, stupid ones who "know not what they do."

"You know, Mr. Protheroe," she continued, earnestly, "I told you once that some day I hoped to convince you you were wrong about those convicts. Maybe this is the time." She managed to smile at him. His face was stony, impassive. "Here's the point: grant that the bill *will* hurt you a little, mostly financially, it will *help* thousands in this State, just as it has in many others, for all the years to come—help the old, and wretched, the sick, and little children in misery, besides the convicts that you think so poorly of. Do you—do you quite dare, Mr. Protheroe," she asked, greatly daring, herself, "to try to block a thing as big and far reaching as this, for your own private purposes?"

"Suppose I don't think it's any of those things," he countered, shortly. "What then?"

"Are you fighting it on its merits?" she parried, on the instant. "Your methods would seem to indicate personal animus, Mr. Protheroe, not legitimate objections."

He was looking just below her eyes, and he scowled, angrily, at that.

"But I didn't stop you to express any opinion of those methods," she added, hastily, noting the scowl. It wouldn't do to make him angry, of course. "I—simply don't care to. The chief thing I think about them, anyway, is that they are mistaken. There are so many more people who won't believe evil than people who will. Besides, those or any other tactics won't prevail against a thing if it's right!"

She had never been as sure of anything in her whole life.

"This bill is right," she told him. And then, she remembered something V. A. Craig had said once: "there's no such thing as right"—so she changed it: "or at least it's righter than your way. It's the better thing! Don't try to stop that, Mr. Protheroe, because no one can. It's simply *going to be!*"

The glorious, soaring certainty of it, a new certainty sweeping in from the great outside, as on a rush of wings!

But he was looking at her with a chilled stiffening of his whole countenance.

"That's a fine sermon, all right, young lady," he observed, sarcastically. "But I'm just a plain, practical farmer, you see, and I'm afraid I can't fly that high. You'll have to excuse me now, please, I've got an appointment down the hall." And he turned upon his heel and departed.

Nancy leaned back against the wall, overpowered by a surging fury that shook her from

head to foot. Her small fists were clenched at her sides and she breathed heavily.

"Well," said a deliberate voice, from the turn of the corridor just behind her, "I don't know what it's all about, but I'll lick him in two seconds if you'll let me."

"Avery Standish!" Nancy gasped, whirling. "Where—how did—oh!—"

He smiled down at her leisurely, enjoying her surprise.

"Just landed. Got Doctor Singleton out of bed at midnight last night in Carrollton. He informed me, very briefly, that you were now living in the State House, practically, so I took a chance and came out. Had any breakfast?"

"No—and I'll have it with *you*, right away. Take me out of this hole! Where I can breathe! My, but I'm glad to see you!"

Most people were. Perfection is not so common.

Across a table in the dining room of Big Bend's largest hotel, Standish asked, curiously, fifteen minutes later: "Who *is* that old bird, anyway?"

"Bird? *Vulture*, you mean." She told him the whole story, omitting reference to Protheroe's vilification of herself.

He was silent for several moments after she had finished, tapping the table with his long sensitive fingers and not looking at her.

"It makes me sick—all that, Nancy," he said, raising his head. "It just confirms my long held opinion of this work of yours. Then, too,"—

slowly—"there's no telling what a perverted cur like that may do. Oh, well—" He stopped suddenly and leaned forward, staring straight and intensely into her eyes. "Look here, Nancy! And please don't interrupt. I love you. You know that. If you don't care—that much, at least give me a change of venue. Come up to New York, take a rest, visit my aunt—cousins—any married friends I've got. They'd all be crazy about you. One or two of 'em, frankly, expect me to bring you home with me."

Nancy flushed furiously. "I haven't——"

"No, I know you haven't—whatever it is. But I have. I *do*! Don't shut me off, Nancy. I want you—terribly. It isn't fair to either one of us, what you're doing." Watching her face, he continued, soothingly. "But if you aren't sure, dear, wait till this thing's over. I'll stick. Maybe I can help. How are you fixed for funds—campaign funds, I mean?"

The waiter appeared. Standish said, "Oh, damn!" with disgust, and sat back.

He said it again, but inwardly, when, a moment later, Nancy looked at her watch, remarking: "I can't answer you here, about anything. Too much has happened this morning. I'm all confused. Please!"

Her fingers trembled as she poured his coffee. "Let's hurry through this, if you don't mind, so I can get back. I'll try to see you to-morrow."

A few moments after Standish had dropped

Nancy opposite the Capitol, Craig's stenographer handed her a memorandum to call long distance, Carrollton operator. She was connected with Bob Singleton almost immediately.

"Nancy? I want you to stay away from that Capitol," he began, abruptly. "I've got something under way down here that *may*—I don't say it will—put the skids under Protheroe."

"What, Bob?"

"Don't ask me now, just do as I say. Stay *ab-so-lute-ly* away from that Capitol. *Hear?*"

She promised, meekly, wondering.

"Did Standish find you?"

"Yes, just left me."

"What's he down here for, Nancy?" Bob's tone was belligerent. "I don't like that fellow, somehow. Told me he came down here to buy cotton, on his annual trip, and in the next breath said he'd *got* to see *you* at once—all that at midnight, mind you!"

Nancy laughed aloud.

"Evidently you don't agree with me, Nancy. Doubtless you are more familiar than I am"—satirically—"with his real motive in coming."

"Bob—you old idiot. What's the matter with you?" Nancy was still laughing.

"Matter? *Matter!* Think I'm blind? Think I was born yesterday?—aw, goodbye!" He hung up.

Nancy sat down limply in a desk chair, but she was limp from laughter, this time. She stopped,

presently, a very tender little smile lingering on her lips. "Bless his heart," she said, under her breath. "So afraid he's going to lose his pal. Bless his old soul!"

Getting up, she obediently left for home.

As she boarded a street-car, two blocks away, Standish entered Craig's office.

Some three hours later, Bob was handed Nancy's letter advising him to laugh. But he was much too busy at the moment. Billy Conroy sat on the other side of his office table. Billy had been most inconveniently out "in the country," vague miles from telephone or railroad, all the day and night before, with his family, at a dying grandfather's.

"Kid, are *you sure?*" Bob said, for the third time. "I had a hunch you'd know something—you're a pretty sharp youngster. But Billy, old man, this has *got* to be straight facts and no embroidery."

Billy's eyes met his squarely. "I ain't in the habit o' lyin'," he stated.

At 3:30 he and Bob Singleton walked into V. A. Craig's office in Big Bend and shut the door after them. Nancy, summoned by telephone, was standing at a window. She turned as they entered. She had not known how terribly she had missed Bob for all these years—decades—since December 26th, until he smiled across at her. And Billy! She hugged him, to his intense annoyance.

Bob wasted no time.

"I got hold of this youngster, V. A., sooner than

I expected, as I 'phoned you. He told Nancy and me, before, and the Grand Jury, too, so much about his forty-eight hours or less out at that convict camp—appeared to have soaked up everything in it—that I had a hunch he might be useful on this Reynold's affidavit business. You tell him, Billy."

Craig reached quietly for a pad and pencil.

"He just ast me," began Billy, "if I knew Mr. Jack Reynolds, the keeper o' the Pore House. An' I said no, he *had* been a guard at the convict camp, but he wan't there the time I wuz because his wife had took sick in Greene County with her people—" He glanced at Nancy and reddened. Craig was scribbling away.

"Go on, old fellow," Bob smiled. "That's all right."

"Well, she had a new baby," embarrassedly—"an' Mr. Protheroe let him off. An' after that he maybe went to the Pore House. I don't know."

"How did you find out all that, Billy?" Craig inquired, casually, his hand unobtrusively poised over his note pad.

"Why, in the mawnin', early, after I got there in the night, one guard come aroun'—like he was an upper guard, you know—name o' Hopkins—Sam Hopkins, I think. I ain't sure, though," carefully, looking straight at Craig, who smiled.

"Well, he come aroun' after breakfast when we 'uz all lined up outside the mess house, in three rows—an' a half," conscientiously, "sayin' what

men wuz to go out with what guards to do what work; an' he says to one guard, 'Lefler, turn the kid over to Reynolds. I low he'll break him in,'—talked just like a nigger—an' Lefler says right out, 'Reynolds ain't here. His wife's—wife's havin' a baby—'" Billy gulped it out, at last, "'in Greene County with her folks, an' the Boss let him off. He left yistiddy.' Some o' the men snickered an' went on," contemptuously, "an' the Hopkins feller says 'Huh! Pity th' boss couldn't tell somebody,'—showin' off how big he wuz to us, an'—an' that's all," he finished.

"Same story he told you?" Craig asked of Bob, pencil ready.

"Precisely—word for word—except I think he said the men 'laughed' and went on."

Billy looked puzzled, Nancy looked excited.

Craig moved to the typewriter and tapped away for a while.

In a few minutes he handed Billy his sheets. "Is this what you said to me, exactly, Kid—word for word? Read it, slow, and tell me."

Billy read it slowly, following the lines with a finger, and smiling, in much private and perplexed amusement, over all these goings on.

"Yep," he said, finally, looking up. "You must be a reporter."

"Sign it—write your name at the bottom, I mean, with that pen."

Billy did so, still grinning.

"Bob, you sign that statement of yours at the

bottom of it. Oh! Cal!" he called. The Federation Secretary appeared in the doorway.

"Get your seal dingus and come take these acknowledgments, please." It was done in short order. "May I have those affidavit copies, now?" he asked Nancy.

He was at the door before he said:

"You-all might be prayin' for me while I'm gone. I may come back a grease spot. Protheroe's a good deal bigger than I am."

"Let me go, *if*—you—please!" demanded, Bob, rising in haste.

"No! *SIT DOWN!*" Craig shouted, irritably. He slammed the door after him.

Ten minutes, twenty minutes. Even Billy was watching the wall clock now. He had promised Doctor Bob not to ask questions and he wouldn't, but he would have given the Christmas knife out of his pocket to know what was up.

Twenty-five minutes. There was a knock at the door. Standish pushed it halfway open, the door screening Bob from his view, and beckoned to Nancy.

"It's Mr. Standish, Bob," she whispered, agitatedly. "I'll be back in a minute." As the door closed behind her, Bob, on his feet, swore so savagely that Billy's jaw dropped.

Almost lost in a corner of the huge lounge in the Governor's parlor, across in the Capitol where Standish, over her protests, had all but dragged her, Nancy, miserable, listened to him:

"Here! I didn't go back to the hotel when I dropped you this morning. I circled around the block and came in a rear door of this place. I've been here ever since. I've heckled everybody in the building about this fight of yours, beginning with Craig over yonder." Nancy gave a gasp of dismay. "He wasn't any too cordial, believe *me*, but I gathered enough—before he put me out—to clinch what I was after. That damn hill billy, Proth—what's his name?—has gone even further than I thought he'd dare. I'll wring his neck—" viciously—"if I lay my eyes on him. But see here, Nancy," his jaw set determinedly, "this thing has got to stop—right here and *now*! I won't permit your name to be dragged in the dirt before that howling mob up there. I saw 'em. Good God! It's rotten—filthy—the whole thing! Money'll do anything. I'll *buy* the damn legislature—the whole works. I'll finance a Commission that'll make every State in the Union green with envy. Just marry me—right now—this minute, and let me put you on the train for New York. I'll finish this job in short order and follow you." He gripped her hands.

Nancy, a trifle white, but quiet, drew away from him.

"You're a dear—you really are." She was smiling, rather nervously. "Only you can't possibly understand this business or what it means to me. I'm awfully fond of you, but you're hurting me, just by being here. If I can't make you see

this, just take my word for it. You can help me most by going. You've just *got* to go! You *must*!" Her eyes held his imperatively. "You *only* make things harder—much harder—by staying. I promise faithfully to write you the minute it's over. It may end at once, we're working on it now, but—" she pleaded, "you mustn't stay here and complicate things. You *will* go?"

"But, Nancy——"

She got up. "Will you go?"

Her look was direct.

"Yes," Standish replied, somberly, rising, "you leave me nothing else to do. I'll be in the Jefferson Hotel at St. Louis to-morrow morning, and I'll stay till I hear from you."

Nancy grasped his outstretched hand in both of hers, gratefully, and fled from the building.

She found Billy all but asleep in his chair and Bob, with his back to her, standing at a window. He turned quickly to glance at her agitated face, then—for some unknown reason—resumed his perusal of the landscape, whistling cheerfully, one might almost have said triumphantly, half under his breath.

"So he hasn't come back yet?" Nancy asked, between relief and apprehension.

He shook his head, back still toward her.

Three simultaneous sighs of relief burdened the air when the door opened, presently. Craig shut it and stood, leaning against it.

"We have met the enemy," he announced with

a broad smile, "and they are *licked*! Likewise and moreover, sittin' in a committee room, bound, gagged and choked to——"

Billy's eyes were starting from the place of their residence. The three, observing him, suddenly doubled up. But, in a moment, Nancy had her head down on the table, shielded by her arm.

"Go on," she said sideways to Craig, in a muffled voice.

"I painted him some little word pictures," he continued. "The last one fetched him. It was of Harry Wayne and about ten other Senate leaders sittin' around this table," he thumped it, "or the Governor's table, either, as preferred, listenin' to that kid, there, tell his tales—all of 'em—new baby and all—and readin' affidavits for a change-off."

Then he added: "I stopped by and told MacPherson he could call the bill up just any time, now."

Five days later a beaming Governor distributed four memorable pens to "two ladies, a Senator, and a gentleman," as a tactless cub reporter got it, on the occasion of the transformation of the Public Welfare Bill into statutory law, and the setting forward some ten years of the State's charitable and penal system.

CHAPTER XXII

HAVEN

SHE ought to have been feeling triumphant, but she wasn't, somehow. On the door of the handsome, spacious office in which she sat, alone, at a table-desk, head down upon her arms, was a neat gold-lettered inscription: STATE PUBLIC WELFARE COMMISSION. Within reach of her listless hands were letters addressed to "Miss Nancy Carroll, Field Secretary," of that Commission. The desk calender said March 23d.

It marked the passage of three weeks—since the adjournment of the Legislature—of which anyone at all would have had the right to be proud; three weeks in which a splendid Commission had been appointed and had gotten under way, with Nancy at the helm, Clara by her side, and a trained man coming for chief executive; three weeks in which the social work of Chickasaw County and all Nancy's plans for it had been expertly, if sorrowfully, turned over to Molly Burns and a new assistant; in which Alice Madden had been installed as a companion for tearful little Miss Lætitia, a mass of personal business partially wound up, a boarding place with Clara's cousin in Big Bend secured, and

all Nancy's roots in Carrollton pulled up with a wrench. An incredible three weeks, and a completely forlorn three weeks!

Quite a bit of the forlornness was due to a letter she had written Avery Standish, after two nights of harassed effort. Nancy did so hate to hurt him. She was completely miserable about it and yet she had thought; "what a frightfully conceited thing to be! As if the man were never going to recover from me—I being the only woman in his universe." So she had attempted to tincture with a relieving flavor of humor and raillery, her letter, which, in precipitate, said very definitely and simply that he and she were too far apart in interests, methods, and their whole philosophy to make marital teamwork possible.

His answer she considered the most perfect expression of the "*chevalier sans reproche*," that could well be imagined.

She endeavored thereafter, somewhat unsuccessfully, to forget the pain his words had so delicately concealed.

Nancy raised her tousled head, propped her chin morosely on one hand and gazed gloomily out of one of the huge windows at the smooth, grassy brown stretch of the Capitol grounds, sloping down to a street a block away. Clara stood there, waiting for a car to take her out to a Children's Home to study the record system. Every line of her distant, trim, tailor-made figure bespoke energy and decision—Nancy heaved a gusty sigh.

Her eyes wandered on past Clara, over the roofs of the big town, to the far yellow sandbanks and bars of the river, sweeping around a smooth curve between sheer rock cliffs. She could dimly see the buildings and flagstaff of the fort on top of one of them. Lovely—yes—that landscape spread out, so, in the chill spring sunlight, but with one great and irreparable defect. It was not located in Carrollton!

Nancy could remember the period when she had applied rather scoffing adjectives to Carrollton, such as "flat—ugly—hot, and so forth." But not for a long time. Of late she had become its stout partisan, boasting with the professional boosters of its superior new high school and country club, positively excited over every new "story" and glass store front on Main Street! That's what it meant to live in a town, and love it, and be loved by it. It was *her* town, and good to her—and generous. It had taken her and her down-and-outs to its warm, old Southern heart.

She defied Big Bend—or the capitals of the earth—to make her like them as much as she liked Carrollton!

And there wasn't any Molly or Cousin Lætitia or Mr. Payne in Big Bend. She would miss him most of the three, somehow. They weren't exactly on the same road—he on his broad, traveled highway, she blazing and hacking her way painfully through underbrush on her little private by-path to his destination, but just the same, it was good to be within hail of him. And Bob, Bob!

She drooped her head dejectedly upon her arms again. When she had told Bob of the Commission's insistence that she come to them, she had dimly expected opposition—instant objections. Instead, he had only looked away a minute and then said, soberly, almost in V. A. Craig's words: "You must do it, Nancy. Unless you start them off properly the whole scheme will flash in the pan."

"But it *isn't* just to start 'em off!" she had wailed. "It's for all the time, Bob." And he had opened his mouth as if to say something and shut it again, glancing at her rather queerly.

There was a sound at the door. She raised her heavy head. It opened and Bob, bringing all the wind and sun and glow of outdoors, it seemed, grinned at her delightedly, as he came in and closed it. She sprang up and gave him both hands, utterly joyous—radiant.

"Oh! you *nice* Bob! How did you know to come just exactly now? Oh! I'm *so* glad! I had the bluest blues— Sit down."

He slung his overcoat and big driving gloves carelessly over on a nearby chair and settled himself on the edge of her table, swinging one long leg off and smiling warmly down at her, in her low desk chair.

"How do you like yourself, Miss Carroll, as a State official with a shingle in the Capitol?" he inquired. "I was scared to come in. You're that grand!" He stared all around with interest. It was his first visit.

An instant shadow fell across the laughter in that traitorous face of hers.

"I don't," she stated, briefly.

Bob glanced at her with sudden keenness. "Things going wrong?"

"No—wonderfully."

She gave him a *résumé* of her last ten days and fished about in the desk drawers, extracting the correspondence with the new Executive Secretary-to-be, for him to read and "size-up, please." She was plainly gratified by his interspersed approval.

"Then what seems to be the main difficulty?" he queried, as he finished reading it. His tone was casual but his eyes were searching.

Nancy looked up at him, scowling. "Main difficulty is I'm a plain darned fool, I think, maybe."

He laughed, with a flash of his white teeth and a quizzical amusement in his steady eyes. "You don't appear to be certain of that."

"No," she replied. "I don't appear to be certain of anything, right now." And she gazed somberly out of the window once more.

A sudden gleam flashed into his watchful face and was gone again.

"I've never been much of a mind reader," he remarked, negligently.

A little smile flickered around Nancy's lips, but gloom returned.

"It's just as well. I haven't any to read." She wheeled around at him. "Can you give me one

sane reason, Bob Singleton, why I should be feeling as if the desert of Sahara stretched before me, without an oasis?"

There was genuine exasperation in her voice.

He was about to, it seemed, but she went on irritably: "Why, I'm crazy about the work! It's wonderful. Chance of a lifetime to put over a perfectly tremendous piece of pioneering. Incidentally, this work'll put me right up among the big ones of the country. Why, good Lord! letters are pouring in here already, Bob, from all over the State—congratulations—reports of abuses—pledges of help—every kind of thing. Perfectly gorgeous opportunity—on a state wide scale. And here I sit." She slumped, in self-mimicry, "And every now and then I beat my mind on the head and say: 'Enthuse, darn you! What's the matter with you? Are you dead? Can't you *see* it's glorious? Wake up!' And there's not a spark—" disgustedly—"not a spark. The most magnificent chance that could face a woman, and I look at it and think: 'Stale, flat, and unprofitable!' Goes around in my head like a tune—'stale, flat, and unprofitable.' Why? In the name of sense! Why?"

If ever a groping, bewildered soul looked out from anyone's eyes, Nancy's did, at that moment.

"And you needn't tell me its just a let-down, a reaction after strain," she added quickly, "or nerves again, like last summer, or health, because it's not. I'm through reacting, now. And I'll be

home about half of my time so I won't stay lonesome long, after I get used to this. Everything's lovely, big fight won, straight road ahead all full of thrill, and glory,—and I could lay my silly fool head down on this table and weep—for nothing—for nothing in this world!"

He put one strong brown hand over hers, on the desk. She did not seem to notice but gazed up at him with troubled, questioning eyes. "Did you ever feel like something light, drifting—whirling around—drifting aimlessly—lost in the night at last? Oh! I s'pose not. You're a man."

"Where's your faith, Nancy?"

"I don't know" she responded. "It comes, in a burst, as it did the day I had to face Protheroe, but it goes again—flickers in the wind. I thought it would be the answer to everything, but it's not. It's not enough to hold you, somehow, and neither is work——"

"Rot!" she broke off, abruptly. "A month from now I'll be buzzing around like a spinning top, up to my eyes in my job. Isn't it fortunate the lulls don't come often, to give you time to think?"

"A month from now," he repeated, "will you be happy—spinning around?"

"No," she answered. "But I'll be other things."

"You won't be happy, though," he said; "that's the point. And neither will I. Don't you think we might both—get to be, if we could arrange to be together—always, Nancy?" His hand tightened

its hold. His eyes drew her wide, startled gaze to him

"You mean—? What *do* you mean——?"

"I mean what I've meant ever since I was born, I think," he replied, "that I want you to be my wife, Nancy."

A hot tide flooded her face, but some blind instinct of courage kept her eyes steady, meeting his.

"I didn't know," she told him. "I thought you didn't mean it—that day. Perhaps you won't believe I was so stupid as not to see. But it's true. I didn't know. And you never said anything after that first time. Why?"

"Because you weren't ready to listen. You had a job to do—and blinders on "

"I *have* a job to do."

He shook his head.

"Others can do it. The foundation's laid."

She took her hand away from his and sat, looking down, pleating an envelope from the table into folds. It was the only way she could keep her hands from trembling, noticeably.

"What is—love, Bob?" she asked. "I've never known. I don't now. If it's three fourths sex I can't—qualify." She steadied her voice with an effort, not glancing up.

"It isn't. It's 'the marriage of true minds' I guess," he answered her, whimsically, eyes on her downcast head. And then he saw that betraying bit of paper flutter under her slender, shaking fingers, and his face grew, suddenly, very gentle.

"See here, Nance," he said cheerfully. "We're two awfully good life-time pals, and there's simply no sense in our getting all tragic and wrought-up over this business. Why shouldn't we discuss it, like anything else? It may not be the conventional thing to do"—lightly—"but what care we?"

She lifted her head, instantly, at that, in a rush of gratitude. "Oh! you wonderful, dear old sport. I worship you, you know. If that were enough. But it's not that—so much."

"What then, Nancy?"

"Well," she began slowly. "When you're enlisted I guess you don't desert, do you?"

"Before you enlisted," he said, "you were a woman—entitled to the life of one."

"But I *did* enlist."

"And reached your objective. Others can hold it—Clara here, Molly in Carrollton. *Your* job's done—the one that only you could do."

"Maybe. But suppose I don't want it to be? Suppose I'm not ready for placid retirement—that I like the arena and the outpost? That I belong there?"

He laughed at her teasingly, tenderly.

"Your idea of married life, my dear, seems to be a tower room and a large key. The Turk type of husband went out of style, you know, about the time the Pedestal Wife did. Nowadays wives do things, and their poor husbands strain their backbones endeavoring not to become known as such. I can't just see you 'placid.'"

"Maybe," she said again soberly, "but I don't know. I think it's choice, for a woman. A man can have both—marriage *and* work."

"Look at me, Nancy," he commanded, for she had turned away. "Suppose that's true—I don't admit it for a moment—but suppose it is. Here's your choice then: love, marriage, home, an anchor against your drifting, children, Nancy," his voice quivered ever so slightly, "versus work and winning——"

"And a real part in the struggle to push up the race."

"Shall I make the obvious answer?"

She flushed. "No. I know it."

"Then one thing more and I rest my case," he achieved a smile. "Until you *live* life you can't tell others how to, very successfully. A number of people have told you that in a number of ways, if you'll think back a bit. That's all," coolly.

His very soul cried out in protest against him, but to save it from destruction he could not have said the four simple words: "I love you, Nancy."

He could not—and more, he would not—plead self and play upon the taut string of sex and undermine her pitiful defenses. Everything in him strove for a control that would leave her free.

She was staring down at her tight-locked hands again—breathing unevenly. "I'm afraid," he heard her half whisper—"afraid of it."

Bob's air of calm reasonableness broke a little.

"Nancy, Nancy, not of me!" It was a cry for

belief, from the depths of him. But he went on, very quietly. "Love isn't some great tragic, abstract thing, dear, to be afraid of. It's very simple and ordinary. For me it's just you, you know, and life together. Nothing else."

She reached, unseeingly, for his hand. "You'll give me some time—to think about it, Bob?"

He smiled at the top of her tumbled, dark head.

"Why," he declared, "this'll be *your* marriage as well as mine, you see. It's a coöperative affair, worse luck, so I can't exactly dictate your conduct, much as I'd like to. Take a month, take a year. It's up to you. I've waited some time. I can wait longer." And he got the smile he wanted.

"Now suppose," he continued, "that we stop talking—short off—and do something quite different. I'm thirsty and I passed a good movie on the way out."

There began a little Purgatory of indecision for Nancy from that day forth. Sometimes she would sit for an hour in her room, an open letter from Bob in her lap, thinking—wondering. He wrote daily—wonderful letters, letters that gave glimpses of the shy soul, deep down, of a poet and a lover, of a man she had not known at all. Her "dear old Bob," ready "pal," convenient assistant, was gone—no, not gone, but simply one aspect, now, of this new Bob she was learning to know.

She would have been abashed, self-conscious, when they saw each other, but he simply would not

have it. They laughed and adventured forth in the same comradely way, with no hint of sentiment. He set the tone, keeping his word scrupulously, waiting her time and pleasure.

When Nancy sat and thought of this clean, generous sportsmanship and restraint her heart went out to him sometimes, in a quivering flood of devotion, and she would think: "Surely, this is love, surely it is enough." But his letters frightened her a bit with their hint of a great passion she did not feel. Would it be fair to *him* to take so much and give no equivalent?

She remembered, with shame, the month in which she had blamed and doubted him. He would never have doubted her.

Nancy had imagined once, that if she came to love it would be, with her, a faith and a passion like that—overwhelming,—even frightening. It wasn't, somehow. She thought of all the flaming love lyrics that burned and glowed in the pages of the world. That's how she *ought* to be feeling. And she wasn't. Ergo, she must not be in love, and the anchor against drifting was not for her. Heigh-ho!

She was extremely unhappy—those weeks. The thing was so crucial. A real show down.

Sometimes the eyes of all the people who had said to her "You don't understand"—the accusing eyes of Margery, the hurt eyes of Avery Standish, Mammy Line's quizzical old gaze, the look of all those mothers who had regarded her indulgently—

even the deep, sorrowful eyes of her own little mother—they gazed at her reproachfully. Was it this they all meant—love—marriage—motherhood? She faced those three things, flaming-cheeked, head up. She concluded, finally, that those people and Bob were right—one ought not to duck experience—life—if only because it made one a bigger fighting unit in the scheme. For she would never desert the fight, she said to herself, ardently, —married or single. Never, never!

And then, after all that sound reasoning, Nancy would think miserably. “But I can’t. I can’t! I don’t love him enough. And he’s too wonderful to hurt. It wouldn’t be fair to him to marry him unless I loved him as he loves me.”

Yet, another time, with him, seeing Bob’s big hand tremble, suddenly, as it gripped a chair arm, she would lay her wet cheek against it, brokenly, in a passion of pity for the pathetic, dear, big boy he was—needing her so.

Nancy told nobody, of course. And she made a deliberate effort to submerge deep into her new work, to give it a try-out, in order to see if the former fascination of it could be recaptured. She was not particularly successful. Then she saw a lot of V. A. Craig, too. He was such a cheerful rationalist. Nancy thought he’d be a good antidote for sentimentality and morbidity—there was always a danger of those things, of course, when people began to make excursions inward. Sad experience had taught her that.

One week-end, near the end of April, Nancy was at home in Carrollton, and Bob telephoned. "I have news of some importance," he said. "I want to see you."

She sat waiting for him, in her living room. Outside a silvery April rain was falling on the fresh green earth. Through the open window the thrilling fragrance of lilacs was borne in, in little windy gusts. Exquisitely soothing, it was, but she was bolt upright in a chair, strung to unhappy resolution, heedless of any beauty, thinking only, over and over: "I will tell him now—tell him it isn't to be. I'll end this, and free him." She was clenching her hands. "I *can* keep my nerve, if I try. And I will!"

She met him at the door, smiling cheerfully, but he looked strangely serious. In the living room he handed her a letter, silently, and moved away from her, sitting down upon the broad window seat and staring out at the rain as she read it.

Nancy started, at sight of the name upon the letter-head—that of the most famous firm of surgeons in America. The letter, which began with a reference to "your excellent work here last summer," was a brief offer of a position as first surgical assistant, duty to begin "as soon as possible." It was very short, but she read it three times, then she felt she could trust her voice.

"You'll go, of course?" she asked him, and, hastily, "it's wonderful, Bob. I don't have to tell you how glad I am—and proud." She bit her lips.

"Yes, I'll go," he replied, deliberately, "provided you go with me, Nancy."

She stared at the floor, at her lap—at anything. There was a hateful refrain singing in the back of her head: "Going away—he's going away."

"I was waiting to talk to you about that," she began. (If she could only manage her voice, now, she'd be all right.) "I have decided that perhaps I'm not the one for you after all, Bob. You—you're entitled to the utmost and I don't seem to—to feel it. So it wouldn't be fair, to you, you see." (Those stupid tears! What a fool she was!)

He was regarding her steadily with a queer half smile.

Nancy turned her head sideways, in a little movement of desperation, trembling violently. (How could she stand it—*stand* it, if he went for good?)

"I—er—think that's the right thing, Bob," she added. "I've thought over this a lot, and there's work for me to—do here, of course, there's a——"

Because she could not help it she turned to him.

He was looking at her with that little smile of utter comprehension—completest pity.

"Come here, Nancy," he said, very gently, holding out both arms.

And she went to him, blindly, stumbling, sinking down in a passionate movement at his knees, clinging to his hand, sobbing—sobbing brokenly, her face hidden.

He stooped swiftly to pick her up but she resisted, shaking her head, and sobbed on.

"I love you. I love you." It was a shaken whisper. "Terribly—terribly. I didn't know it. But I do—I do. You won't leave me? I'll die if you do."

He bent over and soothed her, with protesting tenderness, as he would have soothed a child.

"No, no, little sweetheart. Never—never so long as we live. My little Nancy! Such a game little fighter. Fighting such a big thing. And no mother— But it's *all* right, dear. Everything is."

He picked her up, then, and put her beside him on the window seat, arm close around her, her face buried on his rough tweed shoulder, his cheek against her soft hair.

Back of them the gray veil of the rain glinted silver, as it fell, and the lilac plumes were blowing rapturously.

Like a child, tired of crying, her sobs slackened soon, quiveringly, with trembling breaths between. "I'm a f-f-fool," she stormed at herself, presently, in a muffled voice, face still hidden.

He laughed a little. "I know it. Better than you do—but just keep right on being one, that's all I ask."

In a sudden access of bashfulness, at that, she tried to pull away, but his arm tightened. "No."

Then she said again, in a breath of passion: "Oh! I love you so! And I need you—need you. Always, I have. But I didn't know it. Why didn't you tell me?"

He made no answer, and in a moment, she whispered, more to herself than to him: "I am happy!"

It was the first time in her life she had ever said that.

Ah! the peace of it—the safety of his steady arm! Questions answered, doubts stilled. "This is *right*," she thought, without reason, just as she had said it to Protheroe, of her big plan.

They were silent for a long time then, he, manlike, thinking forward: "She is mine, now. That's settled. I will do thus, and so. I will be so good to her and so careful, always—my little, sensitive Nancy. She must never be sorry, never for one moment in her whole life. We can leave next month, I guess. We—" And then— "My *wife*!" and he trembled.

But she, womanlike, was thinking backward, to two foolish little girls who had sat on some stone steps—centuries ago—wondering why they had been born; to *Margery*, poor cheated Margery, and poor, despairing little mother— She could understand now, with an ache of pity. And she thought: "I know why *I* was born."

A faint gleam of sunlight flickered through the slackening rain, falling in a pale gold radiance upon them. Nancy drew in a deep breath, and

put one small, groping hand up to find his free one.

"Bob," she whispered, with a queer timidity, flushing: "*Do* you—love me? Really?"

"Yes." He was smiling.

"A lot? As much as when you write letters?"

He nodded.

"But you don't say it. *Say it!*"

What a child she was! He tried, but he couldn't, somehow. He only held her closer—his lips upon her hair.

"And you'll love me always, Bob?" as if satisfied.

"Always."

"Forever and ever?"

"Amen," he said, breathing unsteadily.

It was their marriage. The rest of it would be the public's business, not theirs.

In the country's greatest museum of art there is a certain shadowy corridor, peopled with the white ghosts of a sculptor's dreams. At the head of it one comes upon a small marble and stops, somewhat awed. A great hand rises out of formlessness and in it is rough clay—modeling clay. On the clay lie two little dreaming, unconscious figures, the Man and the Woman,—exquisite limbs, pure like the buds of lilies—intertwined. The Woman's groping arms clasp his head with the age-old gesture of maternity, the Man's seeking lips are pressed to hers. Halves of a whole they lie, striv-

ing for unity—beautiful, as is nothing else in Creation.

And Rodin called his marble, as everyone knows, *The Hand of God*.



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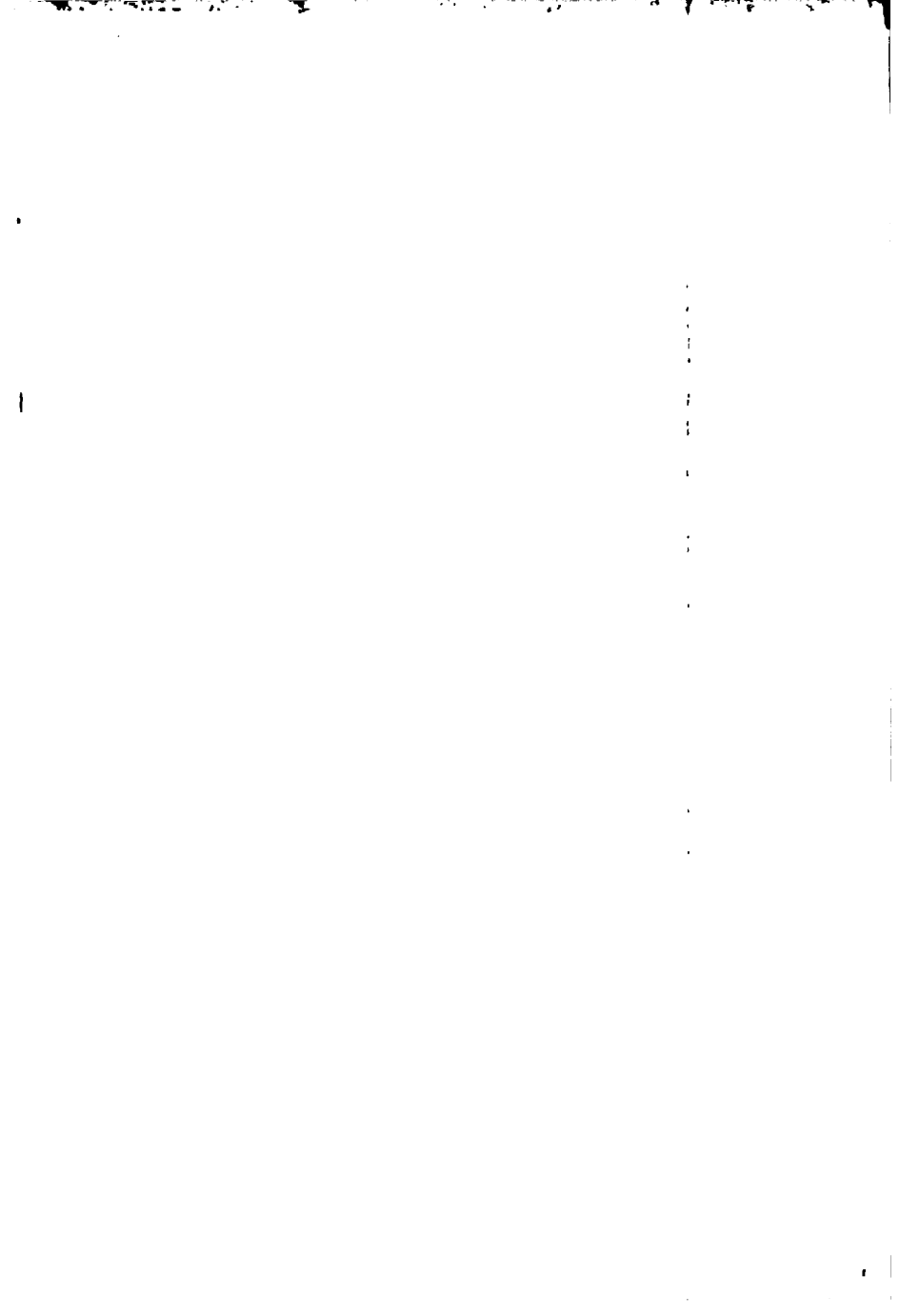
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